



The relationship between perfectionism, agency, and communion: A longitudinal mixed methods analysis

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ABSTRACT

Theory suggests perfectionists are inordinately motivated by agentic concerns (status, power, achievement, and self-mastery) and have deficits in communal domains (friendship, support, togetherness, and mutual dialogue). Emerging adults transitioning to university participated in a 2-wave, 130-day longitudinal design with quantitative and qualitative components. Participants completed questionnaire measures of perfectionism, and themes of agency and communion were coded from autobiographical narratives. Perfectionism was positively correlated with agency (especially status/victory subthemes) and uncorrelated with communion. Perfectionistic concerns and perfectionism cognitions were the most consistent correlates of agency across waves. Results support assertions that perfectionists are concerned with performance, self-control, dominance, and being recognized for achievements. Hypotheses regarding communion were unsupported, suggesting a need to develop coding schemes focused on social disconnection.

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1. Introduction

Personality traits refer to temporally stable attributes and behavioural tendencies that remain consistent across contexts. Though definitions and terminology vary, most theoretical models of personality incorporate personality traits (McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 1999). Though personality traits are quite stable (McCrae & Costa, 1999), there are other aspects of people which *do* change, and *do* depend on context. To develop a full understanding of people, more dynamic aspects of personality are also important. There is less agreement on how to define and name this level of personality. Consistent with McAdams and Pals (2006), we prefer “characteristic adaptations,” and define characteristic adaptations as the wide variety of cognitive and behavioural strategies used to deal with the everyday demands of life. Though theorists disagree on definitions and terminology, most agree personality traits are insufficient to fully know a person. Narrative identity is proposed as a third level of personality by McAdams and Pals (2006). Narrative identity is idiographic, and includes autobiographical stories which provide people with personal meaning, identity, unity and purpose. Research using mixed meth-

ods designs has identified aspects of a person's autobiographical narrative which can be quantified, such as agency, communion and personal growth (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; McAdams et al., 2006). Evidence also suggests these quantifiable aspects of narrative identity are tied to personality traits and characteristic adaptations (McAdams et al., 2004).

Based on this broad three-level framework, we tested the links among perfectionistic traits, perfectionistic (mal)adaptations, and narrative identity using a longitudinal, mixed methods design. To our knowledge, no quantitative research has tested the link between perfectionism and narrative identity, though a few qualitative studies exist (e.g., Merrell, Hannah, Van Arsdale, Buman, & Rice, 2011). Theory (Blatt, 2008) suggests perfectionists are inordinately motivated by agentic concerns (status, power, achievement, and self-mastery) and have deficits in communal domains (friendship, support, togetherness, and mutual dialogue). The present study focuses on the relationships among perfectionism, agency, and communion.

Though there is some disagreement on measurement and terminology, there is broad consensus on two higher-order dimensions of perfectionism (Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002; Dunkley, Blankstein, Masheb, & Grilo, 2006; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). We use the term *perfectionistic concerns* to describe a constellation of traits which includes doubts about personal abilities, extreme concern over mistakes and being evaluated, and strong negative reactions to perceived failure. We use the term *perfectionistic strivings* to

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describe a personality trait which includes rigidly demanding perfection of oneself and unrealistically high personal standards.¹ Evidence suggests perfectionistic concerns and strivings have strong test–retest reliability and influence behaviour and emotions across contexts, consistent with their conceptualization as personality traits (Graham et al., 2010; Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Perfectionism cognitions focus on the frequency of automatic thoughts involving themes of performance-related perfection (e.g., “I have to be the best;” “I need to do better;” “I should be doing more”) over the past week (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). Flett, Hewitt, Whelan, and Martin (2007) define perfectionism cognitions as a characteristic adaptation, by describing them as “more ‘state-like’ than existing trait measures, and [reflecting] the fact that automatic thoughts, relative to dysfunctional attitudes and other personality vulnerabilities, are believed to have more of a surface level and situation-specific nature” (p. 257). Consistent with this conceptualization, test–retest reliabilities tend to be somewhat lower than those observed with perfectionistic concerns (Flett et al., 1998). Perfectionism cognitions are thought to arise when participants high in perfectionistic concerns sense a discrepancy between their actual performance and their idealized unrealistic standards for their own performance (Flett et al., 1998). Perfectionism cognitions may be seen as a cognitive, state-like manifestation of perfectionism that contains elements of both perfectionistic concerns and strivings.

Although there is a rich case history of perfectionistic people in popular and clinical literatures (Blatt, 1995), there is little systematic work on how perfectionism manifests in autobiographical narratives. Blatt (2008) discusses how perfectionism arises from an exaggerated focus on self-definition (agentic concerns, such as identity, achievement and autonomy), at the expense of relatedness (communal concerns, such as love, caring, and closeness to others). Thus, we review the qualitative literature on perfectionism, paying attention to themes of agency and communion to see if we might reasonably expect to see this exaggerated focus on agency at the expense of communion in the autobiographical narratives of perfectionists.

Slaney and Ashby (1996) recruited a sample of 37 people who self-nominated or were nominated by others as “perfectionists.” Participants described themes of high standards, achievement, and performance as central to perfectionism, though themes of distress and relationship conflict were also present. Merrell et al. (2011) recruited a sample of 14 university students classified as maladaptive perfectionists using a cutoff score of 42 on the discrepancies subscale of the Almost Perfect Scale–Revised (Rice & Ashby, 2007). Participants wrote a series of essays about their “very deepest thoughts and feelings about stress, perfectionism, performance expectations, and coping” (Merrell et al., 2011, p. 515). Common themes included stress resulting from feelings of academic inadequacy, failing to meet unrealistically high academic standards, avoidant coping in response to perceived failures, and relationship conflict. Rice, Bair, Castro, Cohen, and Hood (2003) conducted a qualitative analysis on a sample of four maladaptive perfectionists, two adaptive perfectionists, and three non-perfectionists. Maladaptive perfectionists were defined as people in the upper third of the distribution on concern over mistakes and personal standards subscales of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Non-perfection-

ists were in the bottom third of the distribution on both subscales, and adaptive perfectionists were defined as people in the upper third of the distribution on personal standards only. When describing perfectionism in a short interview, themes of chronic distress and dissatisfaction with performance, interpersonal problems, a desire to perform at high levels in work and school, inflexible black-and-white thinking, a need for achievement and recognition, and symptoms of obsessive–compulsive disorder were identified. Schuler (2000) interviewed a sample of 20 perfectionistic but gifted middle school students. Perfectionists were identified using cluster analysis on an adapted version of Frost et al.’s (1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. A cluster of “neurotic perfectionists” were identified who scored high on concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, doubts about actions, and perceived parental criticism. The main themes identified among the neurotic perfectionists in this study were inability to tolerate mistakes, perceptions that others (particularly parents) require perfection and perceived criticism from others as a result of performance failure. All students envisioned their future in highly agentic terms – even at this young age, students focused on getting good grades with career goals in highly-educated, prestigious jobs. Moreover, the neurotic perfectionists reported significant impairments in parental relationships because of perceived pressure to perform at high standards.

In sum, this review of the qualitative research suggests perfectionists are primarily focused on agentic concerns, such as competence, performance and achievement. Their motivation for achieving at a high level appears to be extrinsic, typically deriving from a fear of losing approval from others after failure. Perfectionists also tended to have marked interpersonal problems – however, in the qualitative accounts from participants, these interpersonal problems are inexorably tied up with agentic concerns. Relationship problems were tied to actual or perceived failures in achievement or competence, and the associated feelings of anger and disappointment that result from unacceptable deviations from perfection.

Agency and communion feature prominently in many psychological theories, such as theorizing by Blatt (2008) and self-determination theory (Bauer & McAdams, 2000). Agency represents the self as an individual, typically manifested in themes of achievement, power, status, and self-mastery. Communion focuses on the self in relation to others, and is typically manifested in themes of love, dialogue, caring and community. Themes of agency and communion were adapted into a coding scheme for autobiographical narratives by McAdams, Hoffman, Day, and Mansfield (1996). In research using this coding scheme, agency was positively associated with power motivation (McAdams et al., 1996), positively associated with conscientiousness, and negatively associated with neuroticism (McAdams et al., 2004). Themes of communion were positively associated with intimacy motivation (McAdams et al., 1996), extraversion, and agreeableness (McAdams et al., 2004). Coding schemes for agency and communion show moderate test–retest correlations over 10-week and 3-year periods, supporting their reliability (McAdams et al., 2006).

It is worth noting that the constructs of agency and communion can be conceptualized at one of three levels (i.e., personality traits, characteristic adaptations, and narrative identity; McAdams & Pals, 2006), in a similar fashion to other personality characteristics. Some authors measure agency and communion as a personality trait or characteristic adaptation using self-report questionnaires (Abele, Rupperecht, & Wojciszke, 2008; Studies 1 and 4 in Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke, Baryla, Parzuchowski, Szymkow, & Abele, 2011). In contrast, other researchers measure agency and communion as a form of narrative identity by transforming participants’ open-ended descriptions of autobiographical memories into quantitative data using various coding schemes (McAdams et al.,

¹ There is debate in the literature regarding the adaptive or maladaptive nature of perfectionistic strivings (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Some researchers argue that healthy, adaptive perfectionism is a “pure” form of perfectionistic strivings uncontaminated by perfectionistic concerns, and identify this subtype using cluster analysis or moderation (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; Rice & Ashby, 2007). While we acknowledge the importance of this debate, the present study was underpowered to analyze data in this way.

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