



Perfectionistic self-presentation predicts social anxiety using daily diary methods



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ABSTRACT

Perfectionistic self-presentation is thought to confer risk for social anxiety. Although this relationship is thought to occur dynamically from moment-to-moment, no research has yet tested this relationship using experience sampling methods. The present study stringently tested whether perfectionistic self-presentation predicted social anxiety beyond several important covariates using a 21-day experience sampling design. A sample of 165 undergraduates (75.6% women) completed a series of questionnaires each day for 21 days using palm pilots. Generalizability theory and multilevel factor analyses suggested daily measures of perfectionistic self-presentation, social anxiety, perfectionism cognitions, and depressed mood evidence within-subjects and between-subjects variability, can be measured reliably, and represent distinct factors, allowing hypothesis testing. Multilevel regressions showed perfectionistic self-presentation predicted social anxiety at the between-subjects and within-subjects levels, even when controlling for socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionism cognitions, and depressed mood. Overall, perfectionistic self-presentation emerged as a robust predictor of daily social anxiety, clearly extending prior cross-sectional research on this topic. By understanding how perfectionism operates from day-to-day, we can better understand the processes that give rise to social anxiety, and ultimately how to devise more effective ways to help people suffering from social anxiety.

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1. Introduction

Social anxiety involves a fear of social or performance situations—particularly with unfamiliar people or when being evaluated—and is distinct from related constructs such as shyness, depression, and specific phobia (Beidel & Turner, 2007). Schlenker and Leary's (1982) self-presentational model of social anxiety explains the conditions where people experience social anxiety. These authors proposed social anxiety arises when people are motivated to make a perfect impression on others, doubt their ability to make a perfect impression, and imagine unpleasant evaluations from other people in response to that failure. When all these components are present, a person experiences social anxiety. These components are also found in Clark's (2005) cognitive model, which proposes social anxiety is maintained by cognitions activated in social situations, including self-doubt and the belief that all imperfections must be concealed to avoid negative evaluations from others. Thus, theory suggests a self-presentational style

that involves concealing perceived imperfections from others may be a key factor in social anxiety.

1.1. Perfectionism and social anxiety

Perfectionistic self-presentation is a public expression of perfectionism comprised of three dimensions: perfectionistic self-promotion (proclaiming and displaying perfection), nondisplay of imperfection (concealing imperfect behaviours and concern with the potential consequences of being imperfect), and nondisclosure of imperfection (avoiding verbal admissions of imperfection; Hewitt et al., 2003). Of these dimensions, nondisplay of imperfection more closely maps onto extant theory (Schlenker & Leary, 1982) because this construct includes concern with the negative consequences of failing to appear perfect (e.g., "I thought failing at something would be awful if people know about it"). In contrast, perfectionistic self-promotion involves a more narcissistic, self-aggrandizing personality style (e.g., "I strive to look perfect to others") and nondisclosure of imperfection tends to focus simply on the avoidance of verbal admissions of imperfection without reference to consequences (e.g., "I try to keep faults to myself"), making both subscales less directly relevant to social anxiety. Moreover, of these three dimensions, nondisplay of imperfection emerges as one of the most consistent predictors of social anxiety

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in student samples, even when controlling for trait perfectionism (Flett, Coulter, & Hewitt, 2012; Hewitt et al., 2003). Nondisplay of imperfection is also strongly associated with other negative mood states, suggesting it is important to control for depressed mood (Hewitt et al., 2003; Mackinnon & Sherry, 2012; Mushquash & Sherry, 2012). Thus, we focus primarily on nondisplay of imperfection, rather than the other two subscales.

Perfectionism cognitions are a private expression of perfectionism which reflects the frequency of automatic thoughts involving themes of perfection (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). Although perfectionism cognitions predict generalized anxiety and general distress beyond trait perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, Whelan, & Martin, 2007; Flett, Hewitt et al., 2012; Flett et al., 1998), this construct has not been examined in relation to social anxiety specifically. Nonetheless, perfectionistic cognitions are operationalized as a self-oriented (rather than socially-oriented) form of perfectionism. Assuming Schlenker and Leary's (1982) theory holds, we might expect perfectionism cognitions to be a less robust predictor of social anxiety than nondisplay of imperfection, as people high in perfectionistic cognitions are less concerned with social consequences of making mistakes in public.

While perfectionistic self-presentation and perfectionism cognitions are posited to be more *state*-like, situational features of perfectionism, Hewitt and Flett (1991) outline three features of perfectionism thought to be relatively stable personality traits: socially prescribed perfectionism (perceiving that others demand perfection), self-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of oneself), and other-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of others). Socially prescribed perfectionism taps a more interpersonal, public form of perfectionism posited to be fundamental to the experience of social anxiety and positively predicts social anxiety in student samples (Alden, Bieling, & Wallace, 1994; Flett, Coulter, et al., 2012; Flett, Hewitt, & De Rosa, 1996; Hewitt et al., 2003). It is also linked to other negative mood states, again suggesting the importance of controlling for depressed mood (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Other-oriented and self-oriented perfectionism are inconsistently related, or unrelated, to social anxiety in student samples (Alden et al., 1994; Flett, Coulter, et al., 2012).

1.2. Rationale and hypotheses

Based on prior theory (Clark, 2005; Schlenker & Leary, 1982), we proposed perfectionistic self-presentation—specifically, nondisplay of imperfection—would be a more robust predictor of social anxiety than perfectionistic cognitions, depressed mood, or baseline socially prescribed perfectionism.

Perfectionistic self-presentation and perfectionism cognitions are conceptualized as more *state*-like features of perfectionism (Flett et al., 1998; Hewitt et al., 2003). However, little research has examined these constructs longitudinally (c.f., Mackinnon & Sherry, 2012; Mushquash & Sherry, 2012), and no studies have examined both of these constructs from day-to-day alongside social anxiety. The supposition that these measures have *state*-like variability is largely untested. Reliance on cross-sectional methodology undermines the ability to reliably measure constructs because such methods fail to account for error introduced by daily variability (Cranford et al., 2006). Our study addressed these shortcomings by measuring perfectionism, depressed mood, and social anxiety using a daily diary method across 21 days. Drawing on past research (Cranford et al., 2006), our first hypothesis was:

H1. Perfectionism cognitions, perfectionism self-presentation, social anxiety, and depressed mood would contain a mixture of trait-like stability and *state*-like daily variability, and would be reliably measured using daily methods.

Cross-sectional research asking participants to report over longer periods (e.g., “the past several years”) limits our ability to examine processes occurring within a given day. Given prior theory (Schlenker & Leary, 1982), and available cross-sectional evidence linking perfectionistic self-presentation to social anxiety (Hewitt et al., 2003), we predicted *state* perfectionistic self-presentation would be a strong predictor of social anxiety from day-to-day. Perfectionistic self-presentation is also positively correlated with negative mood states (Hewitt et al., 2003). Some authors have suggested the relationship between perfectionism and social anxiety will disappear once controlling for general distress (Frost, Glossner, & Maxner, 2010). Although socially prescribed perfectionism predicts social anxiety even when controlling for depression (Flett et al., 1996), it remains unknown if perfectionistic self-presentation predicts social anxiety beyond depressed mood. It makes sense to include perfectionistic self-presentation, perfectionism cognitions, and baseline socially prescribed perfectionism in a simultaneous analysis to see if perfectionistic self-presentation can predict social anxiety beyond correlated perfectionism variables. Thus, our second hypothesis was:

H2. Perfectionistic self-presentation would predict social anxiety beyond depressed mood, perfectionism cognitions, and baseline socially prescribed perfectionism at the between-subjects and within-subjects levels.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants had to meet eligibility criteria necessary for a larger research project. All participants were postsecondary students who had consumed alcohol at least four times in the past month. A sample of 174 participants was recruited; 9 were omitted from analyses because they did not complete baseline measures ($n = 1$), or because they did not complete any daily measures ($n = 8$). The final sample consisted of 165 participants who were predominantly women (75.6%), white (84.8%), and relatively young ($M = 20.75$, $SD = 3.31$ years).

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Daily perfectionistic self-presentation

Based on factor analytic evidence from Hewitt et al. (2003), we selected three items (Table 2) with the highest factor loadings on the nondisplay of imperfection subscale of the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale. We used this 3-item short form to reduce participant burden. These items were rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). These items were a reliable daily measure ($\alpha = .97$) in prior research (Mushquash & Sherry, 2012).

2.2.2. Daily social anxiety

Participants indicated their level of daily social anxiety using seven items (Table 2) rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). Kashdan and Steger (2006) developed this scale, and found it to have good reliability as a daily measure ($\alpha = .91$).

2.2.3. Daily depressed mood

Participants indicated the extent to which each of three words (sad, depressed, blue) described their daily mood on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Alpha reliabilities ranged from .86 to .92 in prior diary research (Grant, Stewart, & Mohr, 2009).

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