



Dyadic perfectionism in romantic relationships: Predicting relationship satisfaction and longterm commitment

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ABSTRACT

Perfectionism affects all areas of life, including romantic relationships. However, little is known about how dyadic perfectionism (perfectionism in dyadic relationships) affects students' romantic relationships. Focusing on two central aspects of dyadic perfectionism—partner-oriented perfectionism (perfectionistic expectations towards one's partner) and partner-prescribed perfectionism (perceived perfectionistic expectations from one's partner)—this study examined partner and actor effects of dyadic perfectionism in 58 university students and their partners ($N = 116$ participants) using multilevel analyses. Results showed significant partner and actor effects. Participants' partner-oriented perfectionism had a positive effect on their partner's partner-prescribed perfectionism and a negative effect on their own relationship satisfaction and longterm commitment. Participants' partner-prescribed perfectionism also had a negative effect on their own relationship satisfaction. The findings show that dyadic perfectionism in students' romantic relationships puts pressure on the partner and negatively affects the perception of the quality of the relationship regarding satisfaction and longterm commitment.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism is defined by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards for performance accompanied by tendencies for overly critical self-evaluations and concerns about negative evaluations by others (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). According to Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model, perfectionism has personal and social aspects, and three forms of perfectionism can be differentiated: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism comprises a person's internal beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important; it is characterized by having perfectionistic expectations for oneself. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism involves beliefs that it is important that others meet one's high standards for performance; it is characterized by imposing one's own perfectionistic standards onto others and having perfectionistic expectations of others. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism comprises beliefs that high standards are expected by others and that acceptance by others is conditional on fulfilling these standards; it is characterized by individuals' perceptions that others impose perfectionistic standards onto them and have perfectionistic expectations they must fulfill (Enns & Cox, 2002; Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004).

Regarding the two social forms of perfectionism of Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model—other-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism—research has found that they show different qualities. Socially prescribed perfectionism is a maladaptive form of perfectionism. It forms part of “evaluative concerns perfectionism,” a superfactor of perfectionism combining aspects of perfectionism that are associated with negative characteristics, processes, and outcomes and psychological distress (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). In particular, socially prescribed perfectionism is associated with anxiety and depression (Hewitt & Flett, 2004), low satisfaction of life (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009), and dissatisfaction with achievements (Stoeber & Yang, 2010). Moreover, regarding interpersonal characteristics, socially prescribed perfectionism is associated with interpersonal distress, interpersonal sensitivity, and low perceived social support (Hill, Zrull, & Turlington, 1997; Hewitt & Flett, 2004; Sherry, Law, Hewitt, Flett, & Besser, 2008).

In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism is an ambivalent form of perfectionism. On the one hand, it forms part of “positive strivings perfectionism,” a superfactor of perfectionism combining aspects of perfectionism that are associated with positive characteristics, processes, and outcomes (Bieling et al., 2004; Frost et al., 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). For example, other-oriented perfectionism is associated with mastery in personal projects, enhanced test performance, and job engagement (Childs & Stoeber, 2010; Flett, Blankstein, & Hewitt, 2009; Hewitt & Flett, 2004). On

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the other hand, it is associated with negative interpersonal qualities such as hostility, blaming others, and low agreeableness (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004; Hill, McIntire, & Bacharach, 1997). Moreover, in a study with university students, other-oriented perfectionism was associated with interpersonal styles characterized as arrogant, dominant, calculating, and vindictive (Hill, Zrull, & Turlington, 1997).

2. Dyadic perfectionism and relationship quality

Perfectionism affects all areas of life, including romantic relationships. In a study investigating areas of life affected by perfectionism, 28% of a student sample and 23% of an internet sample indicated that they were perfectionistic in their romantic relationships (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Hence, dyadic perfectionism—that is, perfectionism in dyadic relationships focusing on the two members of the dyad—is an important topic in research on perfectionism and romantic relationships.

In Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model, dyadic perfectionism has two forms: partner-oriented perfectionism and partner-prescribed perfectionism. Partner-oriented perfectionism is other-oriented perfectionism where the "other" stands for the partner. Thus, partner-oriented perfectionism captures perfectionistic expectations towards the partner. Partner-prescribed perfectionism is socially prescribed perfectionism where the "socially" stands for the partner. Thus, partner-prescribed perfectionism captures perceived perfectionistic expectations coming from the partner (Habke, Hewitt, & Flett, 1999; Haring, Hewitt, & Flett, 2003). Because dyadic perfectionism concerns both partners in a dyad, dyadic perfectionism can have two effects: actor effects and partner effects (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Actor effects are effects where a variable measured in one member of the dyad has an effect on another variable measured in the same member of the dyad (i.e., the actor him- or herself). In contrast, partner effects are effects where a variable measured in one member of the dyad has an effect on a variable measured in the other member of the dyad (i.e., the partner). Only reciprocal dyadic designs, that is, designs measuring both members of a dyad, can examine actor and partner effects.

So far, only two studies have investigated partner-oriented and partner-prescribed perfectionism and relationship quality in dyadic relationships examining actor and partner effects.¹ Both studies investigated married couples. The first study (Habke et al., 1999) examined the effects of dyadic perfectionism on relationship quality looking at dyadic adjustment and two indicators of sexual satisfaction: general satisfaction with the sexual relationship and satisfaction with the partner. Data were analyzed for husbands and wives separately. Regarding actor effects, spouses' partner-prescribed perfectionism showed significant negative correlations with their own assessment of sexual satisfaction (both indicators). In addition, wives' partner-prescribed perfectionism showed negative correlations with their own satisfaction (both indicators). Regarding partner effects, husbands' partner-prescribed perfectionism showed significant negative correlations with their wife's satisfaction (both indicators), and wives' partner-prescribed perfectionism showed a negative correlation with their husband's satisfaction (satisfaction with the partner). In addition, spouses' partner-prescribed perfectionism showed a significant positive correlation with their partner's partner-prescribed perfectionism. No partner effects were found for partner-oriented perfectionism. However, Habke and colleagues did not examine potential partner effects in the relationship between partner-oriented and

partner-prescribed perfectionism, so the question remained if spouses' perfectionistic expectations towards their partner (partner-oriented perfectionism) had an effect on their partner's perceptions (partner-prescribed perfectionism). Moreover, they did not examine the relationships between dyadic perfectionism and dyadic adjustment.

The latter was examined in the second study (Haring et al., 2003) which investigated the effects of dyadic perfectionism on relationship quality looking at dyadic adjustment and marital happiness. Regarding actor effects, husbands' partner-prescribed perfectionism showed significant negative correlations with their own dyadic adjustment. In contrast, wives' partner-prescribed and partner-oriented perfectionism both showed negative correlations with their own dyadic adjustment and marital happiness. Regarding partner effects, husbands' and wives' partner-prescribed perfectionism showed negative correlations with their spouse's dyadic adjustment and marital happiness. Like Habke and colleagues (1999), Haring and colleagues (2003) did not find any partner effects of partner-oriented perfectionism on relationship quality. However, they again did not examine potential partner effects in the relationship between partner-oriented and partner-prescribed perfectionism. Therefore, the question if partner-oriented perfectionism has partner effects on partner-prescribed perfectionism remained.

Two further studies examined dyadic perfectionism and relationship quality in university students (Lopez, Fons-Scheyd, Morúa, & Chaliman, 2006; Shea, Slaney, & Rice, 2006). However, both studies have serious limitations. First, the studies used the Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale (DAPS; Shea et al., 2006) to measure dyadic perfectionism. The DAPS, however, captures only partner-oriented perfectionism, regarding high standards (perfectionistic expectations towards the partner) and discrepancy (perceptions that the partner falls short of these expectations).² Consequently, the studies did not examine effects of partner-prescribed perfectionism. Second, the studies did not have a reciprocal dyadic design because they only measured students, but not students' partners. Consequently, they did not examine partner effects.

Nonetheless, the two studies provide preliminary insights into dyadic perfectionism and relationship quality in university students. The first study (Shea et al., 2006) employed a cross-sectional design investigating relationship satisfaction using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). As expected, discrepancy showed a significant negative correlation with relationship satisfaction in both male and female students. Unexpectedly, high standards showed a significant positive correlation with relationship satisfaction in male students. The second study (Lopez et al., 2006) employed a longitudinal design with two measurement points examining (a) relationship satisfaction using the RAS and (b) relationship continuation as indicated by the percentage of relationships terminated after three months. Unlike Shea and colleagues, Lopez and colleagues did not find any gender differences, but the other findings were in line with Shea and colleagues': Discrepancy showed a significant negative correlation with relationship satisfaction, and high standards showed a significant positive correlation with relationship satisfaction (albeit only at the second measurement). However, only discrepancy predicted relationship termination: Students who reported high levels of discrepancy in their relationship at the first measurement were more likely to have the relationship terminated after three months than students who reported low levels of discrepancy, indicating that partner-oriented discrepancy is negatively related to longterm commitment.

¹ A third study (Ashby, Rice, & Kutchins, 2008) investigated engaged couples using cluster analysis, but did not report correlations between dyadic perfectionism and relationship quality.

² The DAPS measures a third aspect, partner-oriented order (e.g., "I think my partner should be organized"). However, order and organization are not considered core aspects of perfectionism (e.g., Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt and Flett, 1991) and have shown to form a separate factor (e.g., Suddarth & Slaney, 2001).

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