



# Perfectionistic self-presentation mediates the relationship between perfectionistic concerns and subjective well-being: A three-wave longitudinal study

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 November 2011

Received in revised form 8 February 2012

Accepted 10 February 2012

Available online 3 March 2012

### Keywords:

Perfectionism  
Self-presentation  
Well-being  
Longitudinal  
Young adulthood

## ABSTRACT

Dimensions of perfectionism are often proposed, but seldom integrated. Perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings were conceptualized as traits (core, relatively unchanging aspects of personality) and perfectionistic self-presentation as a characteristic adaptation (a contextualized cognitive-behavioral strategy). Theory suggests traits predispose people to engage in corresponding characteristic adaptations, and that perfectionistic concerns confer vulnerability for subjective well-being (SWB). It was hypothesized that perfectionistic concerns – but not perfectionistic strivings – would have an indirect effect on SWB through perfectionistic self-presentation. Young adults (ages 18–24) transitioning into university for the first time ( $N = 127$ ) participated in a three-wave, 130-day longitudinal study. As hypothesized, perfectionistic self-presentation mediated the relationship between perfectionistic concerns and SWB. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings did not predict longitudinal change in perfectionistic self-presentation or SWB. This research integrates prior theory, and provides a novel test of hypotheses using longitudinal data.

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## 1. Introduction

Most personality research focuses on stable personality traits which crystallize by midlife. This level of personality is referred to as primary stabilities (Wakefield, 1989), the “having” aspect of personality (Cantor, 1990), basic tendencies (McCrae & Costa, 1999), traits (Fleeson & Leicht, 2006) and dispositional signatures (McAdams & Pals, 2006). This first level of personality is thought of as core, relatively unchanging attributes and behavioral tendencies of people. This level represents internal features of people that do not rely on specific contexts or situations. For instance, people high in neuroticism are thought to experience negative affect more strongly than other people, regardless of the situation (Nettle, 2009). We refer to this level of personality as a “trait”.

Human individuality is not composed of traits alone. Theorists propose a second level of personality, which is referred to as secondary stabilities (Wakefield, 1989), the “doing” aspect of personality (Cantor, 1990), states (Fleeson & Leicht, 2006), or characteristic adaptations (McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 1999). This level refers to cognitive and behavioral strategies used by individuals to deal with everyday demands of life and includes contextualized features of personality which are contingent on particular situations or developmental milestones. For instance, people are unlikely to be intrinsically motivated in all situations, so

intrinsic motivation is best conceptualized at this level. We refer to this level of personality as a “characteristic adaptation”.

### 1.1. Perfectionism: Trait or characteristic adaptation?

There is growing consensus on two major dimensions of perfectionism: Perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic concerns include doubts about personal abilities, extreme concern over mistakes and being evaluated, and strong negative reactions to perceived failure. Perfectionistic strivings include rigidly and ceaselessly demanding perfection of oneself. These dimensions combine constructs from two dominant perfectionism research traditions: Cognitive-behavioral theory (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990) and personality/interpersonal theory (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Evidence suggests perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings are stable, trait-like aspects of perfectionism (Graham et al., 2010; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Rice & Aldea, 2006). Theory and research suggest these dimensions are not context-specific and widely impact virtually all aspects of a person's life (Hewitt, Flett, Besser, Sherry, & McGee, 2003a). These dimensions are best considered a “trait”.

However, perfectionistic self-presentation is better conceptualized as a characteristic adaptation. Hewitt et al. (2003b) identified three components of perfectionistic self-presentation: Perfectionistic self-promotion (showcasing one's supposed perfection), non-display of imperfection (concealing one's imperfect behaviors),

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and nondisclosure of imperfection (avoiding verbal admissions of imperfection). Perfectionistic self-presentation is a contextual, situationally-activated social strategy that becomes more salient in certain relational contexts (Hewitt et al., 2003b), which is within the purview of characteristic adaptations. Consistent with this conceptualization, daily diary research shows self-concealment – a close analogue of nondisplay of imperfection – changes from day-to-day (Uysal, Lin, & Knee, 2010).

McCrae and Costa (1999) assert traits (perfectionistic concerns) will predict increases in characteristic adaptations (perfectionistic self-presentation), rather than the reverse. Supporting this idea, participants with high levels of perfectionistic concerns show greater desire to keep their mistakes and personal information secret (Kawamura & Frost, 2004), even when it would be clearly advantageous to discuss their problems or limitations (Hewitt, Habke, Lee-Baggley, Sherry, & Flett, 2008).

### 1.2. Vulnerability models of perfectionism and subjective well-being

We test a theoretical model of perfectionism which includes traits, characteristic adaptations and subjective well-being (SWB). SWB includes presence of positive affect, absence of negative affect, and general life satisfaction (Busseri & Sadava, 2011). We use a composite model of SWB, which involves summing all three components into a single composite variable. We prefer a composite model to a separate components model (i.e., viewing all three components as separate, orthogonal constructs) because of intercorrelations among SWB components, and because factor analyses support a single underlying factor (Linley, Maltby, Wood, Osborne, & Hurling, 2009). Personality strongly predicts SWB and setting realistic aspirations congruent with one's personal resources is important (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). One widely researched model asserts perfectionism confers vulnerability for decreased SWB, but not the reverse (Hewitt & Flett, 2002). Longitudinal research suggests perfectionistic concerns confer vulnerability for decreased SWB (Chang, 2000; Graham et al., 2010; Rice & Aldea, 2006). Perfectionistic self-presentation also confers vulnerability for decreased SWB in longitudinal research (Uysal et al., 2010). Results for perfectionistic strivings are inconsistent, with most research suggesting null relationships with SWB (Graham et al., 2010; Hill, Huelsman, & Araujo, 2010). Moreover, perfectionistic strivings are largely unrelated to depressive symptoms and perfectionistic self-presentation once perfectionistic concerns are taken into account (Graham et al., 2010).

### 1.3. Rationale and hypotheses

Most perfectionism research focuses on negative affect, rather than absence of positive outcomes. We advance past work by using a more comprehensive measure of functioning which encompasses both positive and negative components of SWB. There is also a shortage of multi-wave longitudinal research in perfectionism literature. Research using more than two waves of data is necessary to make stronger causal inferences about directionality, and is particularly persuasive when examining developmentally important periods of time where change is expected (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). Our research uses a three-wave, 130-day design to study transition to university, following freshman students across their first two semesters at university – a developmental transition associated with changes in personality and SWB (Lodi-Smith, Geise, Roberts, & Robins, 2009). We also use a longitudinal panel test of mediation (Cole & Maxwell, 2003), which represents one of the strongest tests of mediation in the perfectionism literature to date.

Two hypotheses are proposed: (a) Perfectionistic concerns will indirectly affect SWB through perfectionistic self-presentation when controlling for perfectionistic strivings (Fig. 1);

(b) perfectionistic strivings will not predict longitudinal change in perfectionistic self-presentation or SWB when controlling for perfectionistic concerns.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants ( $N = 127$ ; 77.9% women) were first-year undergraduates attending university for the first time. Participants averaged 18.31 years of age ( $SD = 0.80$ ) and ranged from 18 to 24 years. Participants self-identified as Caucasian (81.1%), Asian (5.5%), Black (3.9%), Arabic (3.9%), or "other" (5.6%). This sample is comparable to prior samples of undergraduates at Dalhousie University (Graham et al., 2010).

### 2.2. Materials

Participants were directed to respond to items using a timeframe. A long-term timeframe ("during the past several years") was used for perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, consistent with our conceptualization of these variables as traits. A 7-day timeframe ("during the past 7 days") was used for perfectionistic self-presentation and SWB, consistent with our conceptualization of perfectionistic self-presentation as a characteristic adaptation and SWB as a malleable outcome.

#### 2.2.1. Perfectionistic concerns

Perfectionistic concerns was measured by standardizing and summing items from three short-form subscales developed by Cox, Enns, and Clara (2002): The 5-item socially prescribed perfectionism subscale ("The better I do, the better I am expected to do;" Hewitt & Flett, 1991), the 5-item concern over mistakes subscale ("If I fail at work/school, I am a failure as a person;" Frost et al., 1990), and the 4-item doubts about actions subscale ("Even when I do something very carefully, I often feel that it is not quite right;" Frost et al., 1990). Participants responded to socially prescribed perfectionism items using 7-point scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants responded to concern over mistakes and doubts about actions items using 5-point scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Research supports the reliability and validity of this measure (Graham et al., 2010). We removed one item from Cox et al.'s (2002) 5-item concern over mistakes subscale ("The fewer mistakes I make, the more people will like me") because of overlap in content with perfectionistic self-presentation.

#### 2.2.2. Perfectionistic strivings

Perfectionistic strivings was measured by standardizing and summing items from three short-form subscales: A 5-item self-oriented perfectionism subscale ("I strive to be as perfect as I can be;" Cox et al., 2002; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), a 4-item personal standards subscale ("I set higher goals than most people;" Cox et al., 2002; Frost et al., 1990), and a 4-item self-oriented perfectionism subscale based on the Eating Disorder Inventory ("I hate being less than best at things;" Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983; McGrath et al., submitted for publication). Participants responded to Hewitt and Flett's (1991) self-oriented perfectionism items using 7-point scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants responded to personal standards items using 5-point scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Participants responded to Garner et al.'s (1983) self-oriented perfectionism items using 6-point scales from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). Research supports the reliability and validity of this measure (McGrath et al., submitted for publication).

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