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Perfectionism and the experience of pride, shame, and guilt: Comparing healthy perfectionists, unhealthy perfectionists, and non-perfectionists

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Abstract

According to traditional views, perfectionists are prone to experience shame and guilt and unable to experience pride. Hamachek (1978), however, suggested that this applies only to neurotic perfectionists, whereas normal perfectionists are able to experience pride and are not prone to experience shame and guilt. Following Hamachek's differentiation, the present study investigated 121 undergraduates and compared healthy perfectionists (high perfectionistic strivings, low perfectionistic concerns), unhealthy perfectionists (high perfectionistic strivings, high perfectionistic concerns), and non-perfectionists (low perfectionistic strivings) regarding proneness to shame, guilt, and pride and state shame, guilt, and pride following success and failure. As expected, healthy perfectionists reported more state pride and less state shame and guilt than unhealthy perfectionists and non-perfectionists. Moreover, healthy perfectionists indicated lower proneness to shame than unhealthy perfectionists and non-perfectionists. However, both healthy and unhealthy perfectionists indicated higher proneness to pride and higher proneness to guilt than non-perfectionists. Supporting views of perfectionism that differentiate between positive and negative forms of the construct, the present findings show that individuals, who strive for perfection, but are unconcerned about imperfections, may well experience pride and be prone to feel guilt, but not shame.

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Keywords: Perfectionism; Self-conscious affect; Pride; Shame; Guilt; Success; Failure; Gender

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1. Introduction

Individuals with high levels of perfectionism are characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting of excessively high standards for performance accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of their behavior (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Moreover, perfectionists often measure their self-worth in terms of unachievable goals of accomplishment and productivity and have their lives ruled by a self-imposed “tyranny of the should” (Horney, 1950, p. 65): No matter how much they have accomplished, they always feel that they could have done—and should have done—better, and thus respond with shame and guilt regarding their alleged underachievements (Sorotzkin, 1985). However, as Hamachek (1978) pointed out, it is important to differentiate between “neurotic perfectionists” (or unhealthy perfectionists) who experience elevated levels of guilt and shame when regarding their accomplishments and “normal perfectionists” (or healthy perfectionists) who enjoy their strivings and feel pride in their accomplishments. Still, empirical studies on perfectionism and the experience of pride, shame, and guilt are few, particularly regarding pride. Moreover, no study so far has investigated differences in pride, shame, and guilt between healthy perfectionists and unhealthy perfectionists in comparison to non-perfectionists. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to provide such an investigation by examining how these three groups differ in the experience of pride, shame, and guilt in reactions both to hypothetical scenarios and to actual success and failure.

Pride, shame, and guilt are termed self-conscious emotions because they are emotions that fundamentally involve an evaluation of the self (Tangney, 2002; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Shame involves a painful negative scrutiny of the entire self and feelings of worthlessness, powerlessness, and incompetence. In comparison, guilt involves a negative evaluation of some specific behavior (or failure to act). Moreover, guilt often involves feeling regret and remorse and may motivate people toward reparation. Thus, guilt may comprise functional aspects and can have desirable consequences. Still, both shame and guilt are painful emotions associated with negative self-evaluation. In contrast, pride is a positive emotion associated with feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction, with some researchers distinguishing between pride in self (alpha pride) and pride in behavior (beta pride) (e.g., Tangney, 2002). Moreover, pride is associated with the positive self-evaluation that one is a socially valued person which contributes to self-esteem and subjective well-being. Thus, if perfectionists were unable to experience pride while being prone to experience shame and guilt, perfectionism would indeed be a depressing personality trait.

However, cumulative evidence indicates that two dimensions of perfectionism should be differentiated (Hamachek, 1978; Stumpf & Parker, 2000; Suddarth & Slaney, 2001; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995). The first dimension has been described as normal, healthy, adaptive, or positive perfectionism and captures those facets of perfectionism that relate to perfectionistic strivings such as having high personal standards, setting exacting standards for one’s performance, and striving for excellence. This dimension has shown positive correlations with indicators of good adjustment, for example, positive affect. The second dimension has been described as neurotic, unhealthy, maladaptive, or negative perfectionism and captures those facets of perfectionism that relate to perfectionistic concerns such as concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, fear of disapproval by others, and discrepancy between expectations and results. This dimension has shown positive correlations with indicators of maladjustment, for example,

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