



Perfectionism and work-family conflict: Self-esteem and self-efficacy as mediator



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 December 2016

Received in revised form 8 May 2017

Accepted 9 May 2017

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Work-family conflict

Perfectionism

Adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism

Self-esteem

Self-efficacy

ABSTRACT

Self-esteem and domain-specific self-efficacy are considered as mediators of perfectionism clusters and work-family conflict. Working adults with family obligations ($N = 379$) participated in the online study. Using cluster analysis and multicategorical multiple mediation analysis, perfectionism was found to be related to low work-family conflict. Specifically, adaptive perfectionism at work and home was related to lower work-family conflict relative to maladaptive perfectionism as mediated by both self-esteem and work-family conflict self-efficacy. Implications of bolstering self-esteem and work-family conflict self-efficacy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The competing demands of work and family roles are stressors on employees (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Mihelič & Tekavčič, 2014). Furthermore, some employees struggle with perfectionism and strive to reach an ideal image of 'employee' and 'parent' and/or 'partner'. Research has found the counterintuitive finding that perfectionists have lower work-family conflict (WFC) compared to non-perfectionists (Mitchelson, 2009). However, we have yet to unravel the mechanisms of perfectionism's relation to low WFC. Prior research on perfectionism has investigated the mediating role of a variety of coping resources, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, on psychological distress (Dunkley, Berg, & Zuroff, 2012; Preusser, Rice, & Ashby, 1994; Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998). Following this precedent, these coping resources are considered as mediators between perfectionism and WFC. Both self-esteem and WFC self-efficacy represent confidence in oneself to manage life and situations one is presented with. Thus, it is through these aspects of the self that perfectionism may be related to low WFC (Beauregard, 2006). If these coping resources mediate, then interventions to boost self-esteem and confidence in ability to manage WFC may be considered and benefit all employees.

1.1. Perfectionism and WFC

Perfectionism is a tendency of striving towards high personal standards and attention to what extent these standards are realized (Lo & Abbott, 2013; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). Adaptive perfectionism is found when high personal standards are often perceived as attained (Slaney et al., 2001), whereas maladaptive perfectionism is found when personal standards are not seen as attained and attention is directed towards persistent self-criticism (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Considering both maladaptive and adaptive aspects of perfectionism has allowed investigations of a variety of psychological outcomes. For example, maladaptive perfectionism is linked to depression (Rice et al., 1998), general distress and anxiety (Dunn, Whelton, & Sharpe, 2006; Park, Heppner, & Lee, 2010), and high strain and burnout at school (Yang & Chen, 2016) and at work (Ozibilir, Day, & Catano, 2015). Mediators have helped explain perfectionism and psychological distress relationships, including self-esteem (Preusser et al., 1994; Rice et al., 1998) and emotional dysregulation (Aldea & Rice, 2006). Alternatively, adaptive perfectionism is related to high self-esteem (Ashby & Rice, 2002) and high engagement at work (Ozibilir et al., 2015).

Although many definitions exist, research reviewed here considers three factors of perfectionism - having *high standards*, need for *order*, and perceived *discrepancy* between current and high standards (Slaney et al., 2001). Adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists' both rate having high standards and need for order, but maladaptive perfectionists rate highly in discrepancy (Slaney et al., 2001). The domain specificity of perfectionism has been supported in recent literature as

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a better predictor of outcomes compared to a general treatment of perfectionism (Haase, Prapavessis, & Owens, 2013). Domain specific perfectionism has been considered in academic studies (McArdle, 2010) and work-family research (Mitchelson, 2009; Mitchelson & Burns, 1998). Thus, a separate work and home domain specific approach is considered here.

WFC commonly refers to the experience of conflict between work and family roles and includes time management issues, psychological strain, and behaviors performed in the service of one role interfering with the expectations of another role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Much like perfectionism, consequences of WFC include high stress (Parasurman & Simmers, 2001), negative affect (Allen et al., 2012), increased depression and anxiety (Frone, 2000), and low life and job satisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998).

Regarding work and family domains, both maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism effects have been found. Maladaptive socially-prescribed perfectionism, perceiving others to have high standards and expectations for one's life (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), among working mothers was found related to increased emotional exhaustion at work and parental distress, and decreased self and life satisfaction (Mitchelson & Burns, 1998; Opie & Henn, 2013). Using a clustering approach, Mitchelson (2009) found adaptive perfectionists have lower WFC than maladaptive perfectionists, who in turn have lower WFC than non-perfectionists.

Friede and Ryan (2005) describe how personality can affect WFC through perceptions of events as more or less involving work and family issues or that personality may create a differing magnitude of perceptions of WFC. The authors also delineate that personality may influence coping strategies chosen and/or how effective these strategies are in managing WFC. Prior research has found perfectionism is related to low WFC (Mitchelson, 2009), which suggests perfectionists have developed successful coping mechanisms to effectively manage WFC. Understanding these successful coping mechanisms may benefit all employees. Further, perfectionism is important to consider as it relates to higher performance (Stoeber, Chesterman, & Tarn, 2010) thus representing desirable employees organizations want to invest in. Thus, we go beyond identifying correlates of WFC, by way of potential pathways between perfectionism and WFC. Thus, consideration of mechanisms that influence how perfectionism relates to WFC is our main contribution.

1.2. Self-esteem and self-efficacy as mediators

Theories based on resource depletion, such as Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources or job demands/resources model are predicated on the assumption that resources are finite and can be depleted (Hodges & Park, 2013). Of Hobfoll's four types of resources, personal characteristics and energies overlap conceptually with perfectionist tendencies to focus too much time, energy, or attention on a particular area or task, resulting in a depletion of resources (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007). As such, when considering perfectionism and WFC, a variety of coping resources may be mediators. Coping resources provide a mechanism to manage challenges of daily living, such as managing work and family demands. Coping resources include relatively stable traits like optimism, self-esteem, psychological control/mastery via situation-specific self-efficacy, and the more environmental variable of social support (Taylor & Stanton, 2007).

In earlier measures, Hewitt and Flett (1991) described self-oriented perfectionism as having high standards set for the self as opposed to a more socially-prescribed perfectionism where one perceives pressure for perfection from important others. As a trait, perfectionism places considerable emphasis on striving towards the best version of one's self and evaluating progress. With its emphasis on the self, perfectionism is associated with self-esteem or the extent people value themselves (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Adaptive perfectionists have higher self-esteem than maladaptive perfectionists (Hinterman, Burns,

Hopwood, & Rogers, 2012). Thus, self-esteem may serve as one mechanism for how or why perfectionists endorse lower WFC compared to non-perfectionists. Through continual evaluation of progress towards standards, self-esteem is bolstered and may protect the perfectionist from the overwhelming strain of WFC. As adaptive perfectionism is related to low WFC (Mitchelson, 2009), the coping potential of self-esteem is of interest.

Hypothesis 1. Self-esteem mediates the relationship between perfectionism (a) at work and (b) at home with WFC.

Though similar, self-esteem is a relatively stable judgment of general self-worth, whereas self-efficacy includes personal capabilities in a specific domain (Bandura, 1997). Bandura suggests no fixed relationship between liking oneself and judgments of capability at any specific given task/activity. Thus, these constructs should be considered separately with self-esteem serving a protective function while self-efficacy may be bolstered through strategic interventions. Further, situation-specific self-efficacy is considered a coping resource (Taylor & Stanton, 2007) as it helps determine willingness to initiate specific behaviors, as well as persistence in adversity and conflict (Di Paula & Campbell, 2002). Specifically, WFC self-efficacy reflects individuals' confidence to successfully handle WFC (Cinamon, 2006). This sense of control and confidence in managing WFC may be why adaptive perfectionists experience less conflict than maladaptive perfectionists and non-perfectionists.

Hypothesis 2. WFC self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perfectionism (a) at work and (b) at home with WFC.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Eligible participants were recruited via a non-profit online database of research participants for a work-family study. Working adults (20 or more hours a week) with family obligations ($N = 379$; 219 women) in the USA participated. Mean age was 41.6 years ($SD = 10.9$), worked 39.9 h ($SD = 9.4$) per week, and 69% were married and 9% living together. Further, 70% reported being a parent and 57% reported having at least one child at home. Specifically, 23% had one child and 21% had two children. Ethnicity was 81% White/European American and 50% had completed at least a 4-year college degree.

2.2. Procedure

Split over two waves separated by one week, participants completed computer-based measures. At time 1, the following measures were randomly presented: demographics survey, Almost Perfect Scale-Revised, self-esteem scale, and the WFC self-efficacy scale. One week later, participants completed the WFC scale (93% response rate). Participants received a \$5 gift certificate for compensation and the IRB approved this study.

2.3. Measures

In addition to demographic information, WFC was measured using an 18-item measure (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000) with a 5-point response scale of *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) that the participant has experienced the conflict expressed. Perfectionism was measured using the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001), which assesses discrepancy, high standards, and order. These dimensions are used in a cluster analysis to create groups of adaptive, maladaptive, and non-perfectionists. The 23-items on the APS-R use a 7-point scale of *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7) assessing the extent of agreement to each statement. Items include for

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