



The intergenerational transmission of perfectionism: Fathers' other-oriented perfectionism and daughters' perceived psychological control uniquely predict daughters' self-critical and personal standards perfectionism



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ABSTRACT

An often theorized but seldom tested possibility is perfectionism is traceable to parents who demanded perfection (other-oriented perfectionism) and parents who used controlling behaviors to dictate a child's thoughts, feelings, and actions (psychological control). In support, perceived parental psychological control correlates positively with self-critical perfectionism and personal standards perfectionism. Nevertheless, there remains much to learn. Does other-oriented perfectionism in fathers influence self-critical perfectionism and personal standards perfectionism in daughters? Alternatively, might the theoretically plausible link between fathers' other-oriented perfectionism and daughters' self-critical and personal standards perfectionism simply be secondary to paternal psychological control? We answered these important questions by studying 159 father-daughter dyads. Fathers completed measures of paternal psychological control and other-oriented perfectionism. Daughters completed measures of perceived paternal psychological control, self-critical perfectionism, and personal standards perfectionism. Structural equation modeling revealed both fathers' other-oriented perfectionism and daughters' reports of fathers' psychological control uniquely predicted daughters' self-critical perfectionism and daughters' personal standards perfectionism. Findings lend credence to longstanding theoretical accounts suggesting controlling fathers who demand perfection are more likely to raise daughters with elevated socially-based and self-generated pressures to be perfect.

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1. Introduction

Early theorists viewed parenting behaviors as the cause of perfectionism. Over 75 years ago, [Horney \(1939, p. 218\)](#) observed perfectionists had “self-righteous parents who exerted unquestionable authoritative sway”. Likewise, [Missildine \(1963, p. 94\)](#), theorized perfectionism is rooted in “persistent parental demands”. And [Hamachek \(1978, p. 388\)](#) noted perfectionism gestated in family environments of “inconsistent approval”. Nonetheless, empirical evidence supporting such claims is limited. Indeed, although self-critical perfectionism in parents predicts their child's self-critical perfectionism ([Soenens, Elliot et al., 2005](#); [Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, Duriez, & Gooseens, 2005](#);

[Soenens et al., 2008](#)), self-critical perfectionism diverges from the outwardly directed, controlling and demanding parenting behaviors described in earlier writings. Explicitly, self-critical perfectionists do not impose lofty demands on others. On the contrary, self-critical perfectionists believe they are the recipients of others' lofty demands ([Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003](#)).

In contrast, parents high on other-oriented perfectionism—the tendency to demand perfection from others and experience dissatisfaction with others ([Hewitt & Flett, 1991](#))—appear more in line with earlier writings (e.g., [Missildine, 1963](#)). Parents high on psychological control—parents who show conditional love and use manipulative and controlling behaviors to govern a child's thoughts, feelings, and actions ([Barber, 1996](#); [Barber & Harmon, 2002](#))—also appear more aligned with past theory (e.g., [Horney, 1939](#)). Nonetheless, whether parents' other-oriented perfectionism influences the development of their child's

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self-critical perfectionism and personal standards perfectionism, beyond psychological control, is unclear.

1.1. Two-factor model of perfectionism and other-oriented perfectionism

The two-factor model asserts perfectionism is a multidimensional personality trait with two higher-order factors: self-critical perfectionism and personal standards perfectionism (Dunkley et al., 2003). Self-critical perfectionism includes *socially prescribed perfectionism* (perceiving that others demand perfection; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), *concern over mistakes* (overly adverse reactions to perceived errors; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), *doubts about actions* (nagging uncertainties about performance; Frost et al., 1990), and *self-criticism* (harsh self-rebuke; Bagby, Parker, Joffe, & Buis, 1994). Personal standards perfectionism includes *self-oriented perfectionism* (demanding perfection of the self; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and *personal standards* (unreasonably high personal expectations; Frost et al., 1990). Compared to self-critical perfectionism, personal standards perfectionism typically displays smaller associations with psychopathology (e.g., Smith, Sherry, Rnic, et al., 2016). Even so, both self-critical and personal standards perfectionism put people at risk for psychopathology in the presence of ego-involving stressors (Hewitt & Flett, 2002). Békés et al. (2015), for instance, reported self-critical perfectionism interacted with interpersonal and achievement-related stressors, whereas personal standards perfectionism interacted with achievement-related, but not interpersonal, stressors in predicting depression. Nonetheless, the two-factor model does not accommodate other-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection from others; Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Initially, other-oriented perfectionism was overlooked due to weaker associations with psychopathology (Nealis, Sherry, Lee-Baggey, Stewart, & Macneil, 2015). However, it is increasingly apparent that although other-oriented perfectionists may not themselves suffer, they may cause tremendous distress in other people (Nealis et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2017). Hence, other-oriented perfectionism has experienced a resurgence in the literature (Nealis et al., 2015; Smith, Sherry, Chen, et al., 2016; Stoeber, 2014, 2015). In fact, it is now clear that other-oriented perfectionism is a dark form of perfectionism tied to Machiavellianism, narcissistic grandiosity, and psychopathy (Smith, Sherry, Chen, et al., 2016; Stoeber, 2014). Moreover, as reported by Smith et al. (2017), other-oriented perfectionism in influencers (fathers, mothers, romantic partners, and friends) predicts socially prescribed perfectionism in targets (undergraduates).

1.2. Psychological control and perfectionism

Psychologically controlling parents pressure children into meeting lofty goals by withdrawing love and by expressing disappointment (Barber, 1996). And theory suggests children internalize these pressures and become perfectionistic to cope with controlling and manipulative behaviors directed at them by their parents (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald, 2002; Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, 2017). In support, Soenens, Elliot, et al. (2005) found perceived parental control displayed small-to-moderate positive associations with concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, and personal standards (but parents' self-reports of their psychological control were unrelated to of these same variables). Likewise, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, et al. (2005), Soenens et al. (2008) and Gong, Paulson, and Wang (2016) reported perceived parental control predicted concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, and personal standards. Similarly, Reilly, Stey, and Lapsley (2016) found a moderate positive relationship between perceived parental control and socially prescribed perfectionism. Given that concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, and socially prescribed perfectionism are aspects of self-critical perfectionism, and given that personal standards and self-oriented perfectionism are aspects of personal standards perfectionism (Dunkley et al., 2003), extant evidence implicates perceived

parental psychological control in the development of self-critical and personal standards perfectionism.

1.3. Parental other-oriented perfectionism, daughters' self-critical perfectionism and daughters' personal standards perfectionism

From a biological standpoint, self-critical and personal standards perfectionisms are heritable. Tozzi et al. (2004) studied female twins and found concern over mistakes (a core facet of self-critical perfectionism) and personal standards (a core facet of personal standards perfectionism) overlapped substantially and had "significant contributions from common genetic factors" (p. 490). Furthermore, though self-critical, personal standards, and other-oriented perfectionism are meaningfully distinct (Hewitt, Flett, Besser, Sherry, & McGee, 2003), they stem from the same general factor (Smith & Saklofske, 2017). Accordingly, parents high on other-oriented perfectionism may beget daughters high on self-critical perfectionism and personal standards perfectionism due to a shared genetic lineage.

Alternatively, from a social learning standpoint, parents high on other-oriented perfectionism create environments for daughters filled with lofty expectations (Flett et al., 2002). Though such parents reward daughters when they meet expectations, they also fail to reward, or even punish, daughters when they fall short of expectations (Appleton, Hall, & Hill, 2010), which reinforces perfectionistic tendencies (Flett et al., 2002). Additionally, from a psychodynamic standpoint, demanding and critical parents lead to establishment of painful and negative introjects in daughters, with daughters' internalizing parents' lofty expectations in fear of losing parental care and approval (Blatt & Homann, 1992; Hewitt et al., 2017). Nevertheless, research on the role parents' other-oriented perfectionism has on the development of their child's perfectionism is scarce. Cook and Kearney (2014) found mother's other-oriented perfectionism showed positive relationships with her child's socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionism. Yet, the extent to which Cook and Kearney (2014) findings generalize to self-critical and personal standards perfectionism, as well as father-daughter dyads, is unclear.

1.4. Present study

We tested whether fathers' other-oriented perfectionism adds to the prediction of self-critical perfectionism and personal standards perfectionism in daughters, beyond daughters' reports of fathers' psychological control and fathers' self-reported psychological control. Based on prior findings, we anticipated daughters' reports of fathers' psychological control, but not fathers' self-reported psychological control, would uniquely predict self-critical and personal standards perfectionism in daughters (Reilly et al., 2016; Soenens, Elliot, et al., 2005; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, et al., 2005; Soenens et al., 2008). Likewise, building on theory (Flett et al., 2002) and research (Cook & Kearney (2014)), we anticipated fathers' other-oriented perfectionism would uniquely predict self-critical and personal standards perfectionism in daughters. We studied fathers, rather than mothers, as perfectionistic fathers tend to be domineering and hostile, whereas perfectionistic mothers tend to be submissive (Habke & Flynn, 2002). Therefore, we presumed other-oriented perfectionism would be most salient in father-daughter dyads.

Moreover, we advanced research on psychological control and perfectionism in two key ways. First, most research on psychological control and perfectionism uses mono-source designs (Gong et al., 2016; Reilly et al., 2016). Such designs are useful, but represent a single perspective on what could be a dyadic problem. Accordingly, our multi-source investigation makes a needed contribution. Second, past studies used only one measure for psychological control (Reilly et al., 2016; Soenens, Elliot, et al., 2005; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, et al., 2005; Soenens et al., 2008). In contrast, we used multiple measures and assessed psychological control as a latent variable. Latent variables

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