Perfectionism and well-being: A positive psychology framework

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in the tripartite model of perfectionism and previous empirical support, the current study explored qualitatively different types of perfectionists and their well-being. A total of 276 college students responded to measures of perfectionism, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and well-being. Latent Profile Analysis identified three distinct latent classes of perfectionists: adaptive, maladaptive, and non-perfectionists. Adaptive perfectionists exhibited highest levels of presence of meaning, subjective happiness, and life satisfaction; maladaptive perfectionists showed the highest levels of search for meaning. Findings call attention to the value of exploring the heterogeneity of perfectionists and their well-being.

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Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality characteristic with healthy and unhealthy components (Ganske, Gnilka, Ashby, & Rice, 2015). In their review, Stoeber and Otto (2006) outlined two key perfectionism dimensions that appear evident across studies: perfectionistic strivings (setting high expectations for performance) and perfectionistic concerns (self-criticalness regarding performance).

Efforts have been made to distinguish different subtypes of perfectionists. Cluster analyses revealed three or four distinct clusters (e.g., Dickinson & Ashby, 2005; Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze, & Rice, 2004). More recently, researchers are utilizing person-centered approaches such as latent profile analyses to identify subgroups (e.g., Moate, Gnilka, West, & Bruns, 2016; Rice, Richardson, & Tueller, 2014). In the three-class model, one group sets high standards for their performance while not being overly self-critical regarding their performance. Another group also exhibited high standards towards their performance, while being excessively self-critical towards their performance. A third group has been distinguished from the other two groups by their low levels of perfectionistic strivings.

Different classes of perfectionists exhibit different levels of psychological functioning (e.g., Noble, Ashby, & Gnilka, 2014). For example, the group of perfectionists with high strivings and low concerns has been labeled “adaptive” because they generally exhibit lower levels of depression and anxiety-related symptoms plus fewer social difficulties. Conversely, “maladaptive” perfectionists with high strivings and high concerns generally exhibit increased levels of depression, anxiety, and perceived stress. Studies that support a four-class model agree in the identification of four distinct groups but show mixed results on the characteristics of these four groups. For example, Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) identify groups of perfectionists by combining scores on high/low perfectionistic strivings dimension and high/low perfectionistic concerns dimension whereas other studies have found an additional group to exhibit very low perfectionistic strivings (Herman, Trotter, Reinke, & Ialongo, 2011).

To classify subgroups, consistently associated personality traits (conscientiousness, neuroticism) have been taken into account. For instance, Rice, Lopez, and Richardson (2013) delineate global personality traits to lower-order characteristic adaptations (e.g., perfectionism) and suggest using both to identify groups of perfectionists. Others note a combined effect of neuroticism and perfectionism on psychological distress but not perfectionism alone, suggesting merits of including personality dimensions (Enns, Cox, & Clara, 2005).

Due to earlier conceptualizations of perfectionism as a maladaptive personality trait, research efforts focused on understanding the psychological distress of perfectionists. Unfortunately, this trend largely remained despite Stoeber and Otto’s (2006) review supporting a focus on potential positive outcomes of perfectionism. Examining well-being as a separate process is important because the absence of ill-being does not automatically translate to greater well-being (e.g., Cacioppo & Berntson, 1999). Ryan and Deci (2001) noted that well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses eudaimonic and hedonic elements. Eudaimonic well-being refers to experiencing personal growth and meaning in life by living fully engaged with activities that are congruent with personal values (Waterman, 1993). Recently, meaning in life has been receiving much attention (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006).

Meaning in life is a multidimensional construct consisting of search for meaning and presence of meaning (Steger et al., 2006). The search for meaning is defined as an individual’s intentional process of seeking
experiences that lead to increased meaning or help solidify current meaning in their lives (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). It is believed that individuals are more likely to seek meaning during times of uncertainty and distress. The presence of meaning is defined as the amount of purpose and meaning an individual currently experiences in their life (Steger et al., 2009) and is positively related to well-being, assessed by positive affect and happiness (Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger et al., 2009) and life satisfaction (Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010).

Steger et al. (2006) suggested that studies should investigate precursors and individual differences in the search and presence of meaning in life. Perfectionism is one promising construct for investigation because maladaptive perfectionists are likely inhibited in their meaning making, ultimately leading to psychological distress (Graham et al., 2010; Sherry, Sherry, Hewitt, Mushquash, & Flett, 2015). Further, Hill, Huelsman, and Araujo (2010) found that perfectionistic concerns was negatively related to purpose in life and personal growth whereas perfectionistic strivings was only positively associated with purpose in life. Park and Jeong (2015) also found that adaptive perfectionists showed higher scores in purpose in life and personal growth compared to maladaptive perfectionists.

Hedonic well-being taps into viewing human motivation and experiences as a pursuit towards pleasure and away from pain, resulting in maximizing happiness. Subjective well-being, which includes a combination of experiencing high levels of positive affect and life satisfaction and low levels of negative affect, has been largely used for the assessment of hedonic well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2006). In regards to perfectionism, Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) found that individuals high in perfectionistic strivings showed significantly higher levels of positive affect and lower levels of negative affect compared to those low in perfectionistic strivings. Further, adaptive perfectionists typically showed the highest levels of life satisfaction and maladaptive perfectionists showed the lowest (e.g., Rice & Ashby, 2007).

In sum, this study delineates latent groups of perfectionists and explores both eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. We replicate and extend the findings of two earlier studies on perfectionism and well-being. First, we replicate Park and Jeong (2015) by utilizing Latent Profile Analysis rather than cluster analysis. Second, we extend previous studies (Park & Jeong, 2015, 2016) by examining multiple well-being indicators covering eudaimonic well-being (meaning in life) and the affective dimension of hedonic well-being (subjective happiness, life satisfaction). We hypothesized that a three-class solution would be found based on prior studies. If a three-class model fit the data, then we hypothesized the following: a) maladaptive perfectionists would have higher levels of search for meaning and lower levels of presence of meaning, life satisfaction, and happiness compared to adaptive perfectionists and non-perfectionists; b) adaptive perfectionists would have higher levels of presence of meaning, life satisfaction, and happiness coupled with lower levels of search for meaning than maladaptive perfectionists and non-perfectionists; c) non-perfectionists would generally exhibit well-being levels that fall between maladaptive perfectionists and adaptive perfectionists.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 276 college students (212 female, 58 male, 1 transgender, and 5 did not report) from a large Southeastern university participated. Participants were recruited from an undergraduate psychology research participant pool and several psychology courses in exchange for research credit or extra-credit. Mean age was 19.59 years old (SD = 2.72) with ages ranging from 18 to 56. A total of 55.6% identified as White or European American followed by Asian or Asian American (14.1%), Hispanic/Latino/a (12.6%), Black or African-American (7.9%), Multicultural (3.6%), Native American (0.7%), Pacific Islander (0.4%) and Other (3.3%), a small percentage (1.8%) did not report their ethnicity. Approximately less than half of participants were first year students (42.2%), followed by sophomore (25.3%), junior (19.1%) and senior (10.5%); a small percentage (2.9%) did not report academic classification. Questionnaires were presented online. None of the questionnaires involved a particular timeframe for considering item ratings. The study took approximately 30 min to complete and was approved by the university institutional review board.

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Perfectionism

The Standards (7 items) and Discrepancy (12 items) subscales from the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) were used because they serve as good operationalizations of perfectionistic strivings and concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). The Standards subscale assesses self-set high performance expectations and the Discrepancy subscale measures the degree to which one negatively evaluates one’s performance. Participants respond to a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with higher scores indicating stronger perfectionistic tendencies. Good internal consistency has been demonstrated among college students, ranging from 0.86 to 0.88 for Standards and 0.91 to 0.94 for Discrepancy (Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 2007). Discriminant and convergent validity has also been demonstrated (Mobley, Slaney, & Rice, 2005).

1.2.2. Personality

Conscientiousness and Neuroticism subscales from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP-50; Goldberg, 1992) were used to assess personality traits. Each subscale is composed of 10 items. Participants respond to a 5-point scale (1 = very inaccurate, 5 = very accurate) with higher scores indicating greater tendency of each trait. Internal consistency is sound among college students: 0.81 for Conscientiousness and 0.86 for Neuroticism (Ehrhart, Roesch, Ehrhart, & Killan, 2008). Rice et al. (2007) found that in samples of college students, Standards was moderately correlated with Conscientiousness (rs = 0.46 to 0.48) whereas Discrepancy was strongly correlated with Neuroticism (rs = 0.59 to 0.65).

1.2.3. Meaning in life

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) was used to assess the Presence of meaning (5 items) and Search for meaning (5 items) in life. Participants respond using a 7-point scale (1 = absolutely untrue, 7 = absolutely true), with higher scores indicating greater experience. Sample items include, “My life has a clear sense of purpose” and “I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant” respectively. Steger et al. (2006) reported good internal consistency among college students (0.86 and 0.86 to 0.87, respectively). Discriminant and convergent validity were sound (Kashdan & Steger, 2007).

1.2.4. Happiness

Global subjective happiness was measured with the 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Participants respond to items using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very or a great deal) with higher scores indicating greater happiness. Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) reported internal consistency ranging from 0.84 to 0.94, good test-retest reliability, and good convergent validity.

1.2.5. Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item measure that was used to assess perceived general satisfaction with life as an aspect of subjective well-being (Pavot & Diener, 2008). Participants respond to a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with higher scores indicating greater level of life satisfaction. Internal consistency of the measure...
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