



## Distinguishing self-oriented perfectionism-striving and self-oriented perfectionism-critical in school-aged children: Divergent patterns of perceived parenting, personal affect and school performance



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### ABSTRACT

Parental expectations and criticism are associated with Self-Oriented Perfectionism-strivings (SOP-striving) and Self-Oriented Perfectionism-critical (SOP-critical)<sup>1</sup> respectively, when retrospectively examining parenting during childhood, but have never been examined within an actual child sample. Similarly, the differential relations of SOP-striving and SOP-critical to affect and academic achievement have rarely been tested within a child sample, nor has the association of these parenting behaviors with these outcomes been explored. The present study consisted of 203 children, aged 8 to 12. Results replicated previous findings within a child sample, indicating that parental expectations are associated with SOP-striving ( $b = 0.29, p < 0.001$ ), which is associated with academic achievement ( $b = 0.30, p < 0.001$ ), while parental criticism is associated with SOP-critical ( $b = 0.31, p < 0.001$ ), which is associated with negative affect ( $b = 0.28, p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, the results reveal these parenting behaviors are related to children's affect and academic achievements, both directly and indirectly through perfectionism. The present investigation lends credence to the *Social Expectations Model* (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & MacDonald, 2002) by providing evidence within the target population, and highlights the divergent patterns of SOP-striving and SOP-critical.

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Perfectionism is a personality style that involves an individual setting exceedingly high personal standards in an attempt to attain perfection, often accompanied with a tendency to be highly self-critical (Rice, Lopez, & Vergara, 2005). According to Flett et al.'s (2002) Social Expectations Model, children's perfectionism arises as a result of parents having exceedingly high expectations for their children, as well as being highly critical of them. This results in children developing perfectionism by internalizing these high standards, as well as the negative self-evaluation. The self-oriented perfectionism-striving subscale (SOP-striving) captures the adaptive side of perfectionism that is associated with striving for perfection (O'Connor, Dixon, & Rasmussen, 2009). In contrast, the self-oriented perfectionism-critical subscale (SOP-critical) encompasses the maladaptive side of perfectionism, in which a person

is overly self-critical of their performance (O'Connor et al., 2009). The two forms of perfectionism tend to be highly correlated, however, when controlling for the overlap between the two forms, a positive and negative form can be differentiated (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Based on the Social Expectations Model, one would expect SOP-striving to be associated with the internalization of high parental expectations, whereas SOP-critical would be associated with the internalization of high parental criticism. Indeed, this is exactly what has been found.

Rice et al. (2005) conducted a study with 241 young adult participants, aged 18 to 22, where they retrospectively asked participants about their experiences of parental criticism and expectations as children. Results demonstrated parental expectations to be significantly positively related to SOP-striving and parental criticism to be significantly positively associated with SOP-critical. McArdle and Duda (2008) successfully replicated Rice et al.'s (2005) findings in an adolescent sample, aged 12 to 17. However, these authors also asked participants about their past childhood experiences with their parents, once again making this a retrospective study. Moreover, while extending this research into an adolescent sample was an important step, perfectionism is already present by age 10 (Hewitt et al., 2002). Thus, if we

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<sup>1</sup> SOP-striving refers to self-oriented perfectionism-striving subscale; SOP-critical refers to self-oriented perfectionism-critical subscale.

want to know whether or not expectations and criticism influence a child's development of SOP-striving and SOP-critical respectively, we must investigate this phenomenon at a much earlier age.

### 1. Perfectionism in Childhood

Stoeber (2012) noted that, even though past research has demonstrated the importance of studying the development of perfectionism, further research is needed. For the most part, research on the development of perfectionism has neglected the positive form (Cook & Kearney, 2014; Hewitt et al., 2002). Moreover, even though perfectionism is present by age 10 (Hewitt et al., 2002), a lot of research on the development of perfectionism has employed adult samples, requiring participants to report retrospectively about childhood experiences, opening the door to potential biases (Rice et al., 2005; Speirs-Neumeister, 2004). Furthermore, most of the studies that have employed younger samples had only adolescent participants, neglecting the need to account for younger children (Hewitt et al., 2002; McArdle & Duda, 2008). One exception is Cook and Kearney (2014), who investigated perfectionism in a child sample, aged 8 to 17; however, they failed to report the mean levels of perfectionism for each age group involved, making it unclear whether perfectionism was detected in children as young as 8 years old. Moreover, these researchers failed to control for the overlap between SOP-critical and SOP-striving in their findings, which is the recommended protocol by Stoeber and Otto (2006), leaving it uncertain whether both forms of perfectionism are present at an early age and making it difficult to tease apart the differential relations between the two forms of perfectionism and various outcomes.

The present study was designed to address these limitations of past research by taking into account both the positive and negative form of perfectionism and fully exploring the levels of both in a sample of younger children, aged 8 to 12.

### 2. Affect and Academic Achievement

Another aim of this study was to investigate how SOP-striving and SOP-critical differentially relate to affect and academic achievement in children. With regards to affect, SOP-critical is consistently related to worse affective experiences. In contrast, SOP-striving is only sometimes positively related to affective experiences in certain contexts when controlling for the overlap with SOP-critical in adolescents and young adults (Damian et al., 2013; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Within child samples, literature examining depressed and anxious affect has similarly shown maladaptive perfectionism to be positively associated (see Morris & Lomax, 2014 for a review). However, most of this literature focused on comparing socially prescribed perfectionism, where one feels standards are imposed upon them, with self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) without separating the critical and striving aspects as recommended by O'Connor et al. (2009). This results in SOP sometimes showing positive relations with negative affects such as depression and anxiety (Asseraf & Vaillancourt, 2015; DiBartolo & Varner, 2012; Morris & Lomax, 2014), which may be due solely to the critical aspects of the general SOP construct. As such, more research is needed exploring the relations between SOP-striving and SOP-critical with affect in children. A better understanding of how these early differences in affective experiences develop would allow us to gauge how ingrained these patterns are and to determine the age at which an intervention would be the most effective.

In contrast, the majority of previous research investigating the relation between perfectionism and academic performance has demonstrated SOP-striving to consistently be associated with greater academic achievement, whereas the relation between academic performance and SOP-critical is less well understood due to mixed findings in previous research (see Stoeber, 2012 for a review). However, even within studies where SOP-critical was found to have a positive relation to academic achievement (Rice & Slaney, 2002), SOP-striving had a much stronger

relation compared to SOP-critical. It is important to note that these studies were all conducted in adolescent or young adult samples, leaving it unclear how perfectionism relates to academic achievement during childhood.

Given their relation to perfectionism, parental expectations and criticism would be expected to at least be indirectly related to affect and academic achievement. However, it is also possible that perceptions of parents having high expectations for success, and being very critical, relate to these child outcomes directly as well. While this has never before been examined, theoretically, parents pushing their children to succeed by setting high standards for them, should relate positively to their child's academic success, as children push themselves to meet these standards, while simultaneously resulting in negative affect due to experiencing increased pressure. In contrast, parents being highly critical of their children might negatively impact their affect and academic achievement, as they feel they will never be good enough for their parents. Therefore, the final goal of this paper was to examine the direct and indirect effects of parental expectations and criticism on children's affect and academic achievement.

### 3. The Present Study

The present study investigated how parental expectations and criticism can foster a certain form of perfectionism. Based on previous research (McArdle & Duda, 2008; Rice et al., 2005), we expected to find parental expectations to be associated with SOP-striving and parental criticism with SOP-critical. Additionally, this study aimed to fully explore the levels of perfectionism present in a child sample and consider the possible effect of child age on findings. Given that perfectionism is present by age 10 (Hewitt et al., 2002), we expected there might be higher levels in older children within our sample.

Moreover, the present study aimed to extend previous research relating SOP-striving and SOP-critical to academic achievement and affect to a younger sample. In line with previous research on maladaptive perfectionism, we expected SOP-critical to be related to negative affect in childhood, while SOP-striving was expected to either be negatively related or unrelated. In addition, we expected SOP-striving to be positively related to academic achievement, while it was unclear what relation SOP-critical would have to children's academic achievement.

Finally, the relation between parental expectations and criticism with children's affect and academic achievement was investigated. We expected parental expectations to have a strong positive relation to academic achievement, but a negative relation to affect. Moreover, we expected parental criticism to have a negative relation to both children's affect and academic achievement. Furthermore, we expected these relations to be at least partially explained by children's perfectionism.

### 4. Methods

#### 4.1. Participant characteristics<sup>2</sup>

203 children (56.7% female) were recruited from four elementary schools to participate in the present study. Children were in grades 3 to 6 and aged 8 to 12 years old (mean = 9.83).

#### 4.2. Procedure

Children were escorted from their classrooms in groups and brought to the computer lab within the school to complete the questionnaires on Qualtrix, which took between 30 and 45 min. At least two research

<sup>2</sup> 107 parents (68.22% mothers;  $M_{\text{age}} = 40.14$ ) also participated in the current study. On average, parents were married (77.57%), of European decent (41.1%), had completed high school or done some college (61.7%) and had a household income between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (52.8%).

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