



Perfectionism, social disconnection, and interpersonal hostility: Not all perfectionists don't play nicely with others☆



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ABSTRACT

The perfectionism social disconnection model (PSDM; Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, & Caelian, 2006) makes an important contribution to perfectionism research explaining why perfectionism is associated with social disconnection and interpersonal hostility. Moreover, recent expansions of the PSDM suggest that the model applies to all forms of perfectionism. The present research challenges this suggestion. Three university student samples ($Ns = 318, 417, \text{ and } 398$) completed measures of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism together with measures of trust, empathy, and hostility including aggression, anger, and spitefulness. In line with previous studies examining unique relationships of the three forms of perfectionism, only other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism showed a consistent pattern of unique relationships indicative of social disconnection and hostility. In contrast, self-oriented perfectionism showed unique relationships indicative of social connection (and low hostility regarding physical aggression and spitefulness). The present findings indicate that the PSDM may not apply to all forms of perfectionism. Not all perfectionists feel socially disconnected and hostile towards others. Self-oriented perfectionists may feel socially connected and show no higher hostility than non-perfectionists, particularly when they are low in other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism.

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Perfectionists don't play nicely with others.
(Sherry, Mackinnon, & Gaultreau, 2016, p. 225)

1. Introduction

1.1. Perfectionism, social disconnection, and interpersonal hostility

Perfectionism is a personality disposition characterized by exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by critical evaluations of oneself and others and a fear of negative social evaluation if not perfect (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Perfectionism is best conceptualized as a multidimensional disposition, particularly as different dimensions may show different, sometimes opposing relationships with indicators of psychological adjustment and maladjustment (Stoeber, 2018). One of the most influential and widely researched multidimensional models of perfectionism is Hewitt and Flett's (1991) which differentiates three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and

being perfect are important. Self-oriented perfectionists are highly self-critical if they fail to meet their own expectations. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. Other-oriented perfectionists are highly critical of others who fail to meet these expectations. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important to others. Socially prescribed perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect, and that others will be highly critical of them if they fail to meet these expectations.

According to the perfectionism social disconnection model (PSDM; Hewitt et al., 2006), perfectionism is associated with interpersonal characteristics and behaviors that make it difficult for perfectionists to connect with others. Consequently, perfectionists may feel socially isolated and hostile towards others and display antisocial characteristics and behaviors. Originally, the PSDM focused on socially prescribed perfectionism, but then was expanded to self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism (Sherry et al., 2016), and the most recent publication on the PSDM states that the model applies to all perfectionism traits (Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, 2017, p. 146). Consequently, all three forms of perfectionism of Hewitt and Flett's model should be associated with social disconnection and interpersonal hostility.

Sherry et al. (2016) argue that self-oriented perfectionists are hyper-competitive which can make them feel hostile towards others. Moreover, their relentless pursuit of perfection—favoring agency over

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community—makes them excessively focus on work and personal achievement at the expense of interpersonal relations, leading to social disconnection (see also Hewitt et al., 2017). A review of the literature, however, suggests that only the two social forms of perfectionism—other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism—consistently show positive relationships with characteristics and behaviors indicative of social disconnection and interpersonal hostility. Self-oriented perfectionism does not. Instead, self-oriented perfectionism often shows negative relationships with such characteristics and behaviors, particularly when the overlap between the three forms of perfectionism is statistically controlled and their unique relationships are examined.

Take, for example, a recent series of studies examining the unique relationships of the three forms of perfectionism with prosocial and antisocial characteristics and behaviors (Stoeber, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). As expected from the PSDM, other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism showed unique relationships indicative of social disconnection and hostility. Other-oriented perfectionism showed negative relationships with agreeableness, honesty-humility, prosocial goals (nurturance, intimacy, social development), interest in others, and prosocial value orientations in a distribution task. Furthermore, it showed positive relationships with callousness, deceitfulness, aggressive humor, and Machiavellianism—a “dark” personality trait capturing being cold and manipulative in interpersonal relations (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Socially prescribed perfectionism showed negative relationships with honesty-humility, altruism, and affiliative humor, and positive relationships with intimacy avoidance, suspiciousness, callousness, deceitfulness, and hostility.

In contrast, self-oriented perfectionism showed unique relationships indicative of social connection and low hostility. Self-oriented perfectionism showed *positive* relationships with altruism, interest in others, affiliative humor, and prosocial goals (nurturance, intimacy, and social development). Further, it showed *negative* relationships with callousness, deceitfulness, aggressive humor, and Machiavellianism (Stoeber, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Taken together, the findings suggest that—unlike other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism—self-oriented perfectionism does not consistently show unique relationships indicative of social disconnection and interpersonal hostility. If one controls for the detrimental effects of other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, people high in self-oriented perfectionism may even feel more socially connected and less hostile than people low in self-oriented perfectionism.

1.2. Trust, empathy, and aggression

In the present research, we aimed to expand on the previous findings by further examining the unique relationships that the three forms of perfectionism show with indicators of social disconnection and interpersonal hostility. In this, we focused on trust, empathy, and aggression. The reason for this was that people need to be able to trust others and empathize if they want to connect with others, so lack of trust and empathy is a key indicator of social disconnection. In contrast, aggression in its various forms is an expression of interpersonal hostility. In addition, we focused on these indicators because research examining their relationships with multidimensional perfectionism differentiating self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism is limited or findings have been inconclusive.

Research on multidimensional perfectionism and trust is limited to three studies examining perfectionism and the facets of the five-factor model of personality where trust is a facet of agreeableness (Dunkley & Kyparissis, 2008; Hewitt & Flett, 2004; Hill, McIntire, & Bacharach, 1997). Both studies including other-oriented perfectionism found other-oriented perfectionism to show a negative correlation with trust (Hewitt & Flett, 2004; Hill et al., 1997),¹ and two of the three studies

found socially prescribed perfectionism to show a negative correlation (Dunkley & Kyparissis, 2008; Hill et al., 1997). In contrast, self-oriented perfectionism showed nonsignificant correlations with trust across all three studies.

Research on multidimensional perfectionism and empathy is even more limited. There is only study investigating perfectionism and empathy (Köksal Akyol & Sali, 2013), and the study used Frost et al.'s (1990) measure of multidimensional perfectionism which primarily focuses on personal aspects of perfectionism. And contrary to what would be expected from the PSDM, perfectionism showed positive correlations with empathy.

Finally, only two studies have investigated perfectionism and aggression following Hewitt and Flett's model of perfectionism, and the findings are inconclusive. In one study, none of the three forms of perfectionism showed significant correlations with aggression (Hewitt & Flett, 2004, Table 6.22). In the other study, “mixed perfectionists” (defined by high levels of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism) reported significantly more physical and verbal aggression than “non-perfectionists” (defined by low levels of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism) (Vicent, Inglés, Sanmartín, González, & García-Fernández, 2017). However, the study failed to include other-oriented perfectionism and did not examine bivariate correlations, so it is unclear what form of perfectionism was responsible for the differences in aggression.

1.3. The present study

The present study aimed to further examine the relationships of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially perfectionism with trust, empathy, and aggression and probe the expanded PSDM's suggestion that all forms of perfectionism are associated with social disconnection and interpersonal hostility. To examine a wider range of indicators of social disconnection and interpersonal hostility, the study also included measures of distrust, hostility, anger, and spitefulness. In line with previous findings (Stoeber, 2014a, 2014b, 2015), we expected other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism to show negative bivariate and unique relationships with trust and empathy, and positive bivariate and unique relationships with aggression. In contrast, we expected self-oriented perfectionism to show no consistent pattern of negative relationships with trust and empathy or positive relationships with aggression when bivariate relationships were regarded. Instead, we expected self-oriented perfectionism to show positive relationships with trust and empathy and negative relationships with aggression when the overlap with other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism was controlled and unique relationships were regarded.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Three student samples were recruited at the University of Kent. Sample 1 comprised 318 participants (59 male, 258 female, 1 undeclared) with a mean age of 19.8 years ($SD = 3.5$; range: 17–50). Self-reported ethnicity was White (66%), Asian (14%), Black (12%), mixed race (4%), and other (4%). Sample 2 comprised 417 participants (86 male, 330 female, 1 undeclared). Mean age was 19.9 years ($SD = 3.6$; range: 17–50) and ethnicity was White (65%), Asian (14%), Black (12%), mixed race (5%), and other (4%). Sample 3 comprised 398 participants (81 male, 314 female, 3 undeclared). Mean age was 20.1 years ($SD = 3.8$; range: 17–51) and ethnicity was White (61%), Asian (13%), Black (17%), mixed race (6%), and other (3%).

Participants were recruited via the School of Psychology's research participation scheme and volunteered to participate for extra course credits. They completed all measures online using the School's Qualtrics® platform which required to respond to all questions to

¹ Dunkley and Kyparissis (2008) did not include other-oriented perfectionism.

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