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An examination of the domain specificity of perfectionism among intercollegiate student-athletes [☆]

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Abstract

There is currently disagreement among perfectionism theorists as to whether the personality trait of perfectionism should be conceptualized and measured as a global personality construct or as a domain-specific construct. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine if perfectionism levels varied as a function of the situational context within which perfectionist tendencies were considered. A total of 133 male (M age = 21.59 years, SD = 2.32) and 108 female (M age = 21.44 years, SD = 2.68) intercollegiate student-athletes participated in the study. Respondents completed three self-report instruments designed to measure global perfectionist tendencies, and perfectionist tendencies in the achievement domains of sport and academe. Results of a multivariate analysis of variance revealed that perfectionism levels varied significantly for both males and females as a function of the situational context within which perfectionist tendencies were examined. Moreover, male participants tended to have higher perfectionist tendencies than female participants in the sport domain. The results suggest that individual differences in perfectionism can be attributed to the situational context of the achievement domains that respondents are asked to consider when judging their perfectionist tendencies. A move towards the domain specific assessment of perfectionism is advocated.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism and its constituent components have been associated with numerous adaptive and maladaptive correlates in a variety of performance settings including (a) positive and negative affect in academic test situations (Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003), (b) excellence (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002) and burnout (Gould, Udry, Tuffey, & Loehr, 1996) in sport, (c) anxiety in performing arts (Mor, Day, Flett, & Hewitt, 1995), (d) stress in the workplace (Flett, Hewitt, & Hallett, 1995), and (e) lowered sexual satisfaction in intimate relationships (Habke, Hewitt, & Flett, 1999). Certain aspects of perfectionism have also been linked to a host of other psychosocial difficulties and psychopathological symptoms ranging from loneliness and low self-esteem to depression and suicidal tendencies (see Enns & Cox, 2002, for a review). Clearly, there is a need to understand the cognitive, affective, and behavioral implications of perfectionist orientations in performance settings (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

Perfectionism has been generally conceptualized as an enduring stable personality trait (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Although no single definition of perfectionism has been agreed upon by perfectionism researchers (Flett & Hewitt, 2002), a fundamental characteristic of perfectionism that is universally recognized by theorists is the tendency to set extremely high standards of personal performance (e.g., Burns, 1980; Hamachek, 1978; Pacht, 1984). Prominent perfectionism theorists (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) view perfectionism as a multidimensional construct that is comprised of both intrapersonal and interpersonal components (Blatt, 1995). Intrapersonal perfectionism reflects the extent to which people make stringent self-referenced judgments about the attainment of their own high personal performance or behavioral standards. Interpersonal perfectionism reflects the extent to which people feel that they (a) experience pressure to reach other people's high standards, (b) are judged harshly by others with respect to the achievement of high personal behavioral or performance standards, and/or (c) judge others with respect to the high behavioral or performance standards that they expect others to meet.

The two most widely used measures of multidimensional perfectionism (Enns & Cox, 2002) are the similarly named Multidimensional Perfectionism Scales (MPS) that were developed independently by Frost et al. (1990, Frost-MPS) and Hewitt and Flett (1991, Hewitt-MPS). Both instruments conceptualize and assess perfectionism as a global or general personality trait. However, very little empirical research has been conducted to determine if perfectionism should indeed be conceptualized as a global personality trait that generalizes across situational contexts, or whether it should be conceptualized (and measured) as a domain-specific construct (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Slaney, Rice, & Ashby, 2002). This seems to be a particularly important issue to resolve because some perfectionism theorists (e.g., Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt, Flett, Besser, Sherry, & McGee, 2003) view perfectionism as a trait that generalizes across life domains, whereas other perfectionism theorists (e.g., Missildine, 1963; Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002, 2003) argue that perfectionism may only apply in select areas of people's lives. Moreover, research into other trait constructs (e.g., trait anxiety) has shown that domain-specific measures are gen-

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