



Multidimensional perfectionism and perceptions of potential relationship partners[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Multidimensional models of perfectionism predict important outcomes for existing interpersonal relationships, but limited research has examined multidimensional perfectionism in the context of initial attraction and evaluation of potential relationship partners (cf. Hoffmann, Stoeber, & Musch, 2015). In this preregistered within-subjects experiment, 381 participants from the United States completed an online survey rating their interest in potential relationships with and stereotypes of five potential relationship partner profiles: self-oriented, socially prescribed, and other-oriented perfectionists, a non-perfectionist, and a baseline profile not mentioning perfectionism. Baseline and non-perfectionist profiles received the highest ratings of likability, desire to be in a relationship, and warmth followed by the socially prescribed, self-oriented, then other-oriented perfectionist profiles. In contrast, self-oriented perfectionists were rated as more competent than self-oriented or other-oriented perfectionists. Participants anticipated being less happy in long term and high investment relationships with perfectionists compared to short term and low investment relationships, whereas the opposite pattern was true for the baseline and non-perfectionist profiles. Finally, participants' own self-oriented, socially prescribed, and other oriented perfectionism each positively predicted interest in relationships with perfectionists, but did not positively predict interest in the baseline and non-perfectionist profiles. Strengths, limitations, and contributions to the understanding of perfectionism in relationships are discussed.

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by striving for flawlessness, setting excessively high standards of performance, and being excessively critical of one's own performance (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Smith, Saklofske, Stoeber, & Sherry, 2016). Hewitt and Flett's (1991) multidimensional model of perfectionism, in particular, recognizes interpersonal as well as intrapersonal aspects of the construct: self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and other-oriented perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism refers to setting high standards and valuing perfection in one's own actions. Socially prescribed perfectionism refers to the belief that other people have unrealistic expectations of perfectionism for oneself. Other-oriented perfectionism refers to holding unrealistic expectations of perfectionism for others.

The distinction between personal and social implications of perfectionism has led to a small but growing literature examining perfectionism in the context of romantic relationships. Within existing romantic relationships, expectations of perfectionism from one's partner

have been associated with lower relationship satisfaction and long-term commitment (Stoeber, 2012). In other studies, socially-prescribed perfectionism has been associated with destructive responses in dating relationships (Flett, Hewitt, Shapiro, & Rayman, 2001), lower marital adjustment and marital happiness (Haring, Hewitt, & Flett, 2003), and lower sexual satisfaction (Habke, Hewitt, & Flett, 1999). With these studies focusing on established romantic relationships, the question of how perfectionism might influence evaluations of potential romantic partners and the formation of relationships had gone largely unexamined, until recently.

Hoffmann, Stoeber, & Musch (HSM; 2015) conducted the first study examining multidimensional perfectionism and assortative mating. Assortative mating refers to the nonrandom selection of mating partners based on their similarity to one's own characteristics (Buss & Barnes, 1986). An example of assortative mating is the observation that people tend to select mates who share their values, political attitudes, or religious beliefs (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). In their study, HSM examined ratings of attractiveness for potential dating partners characterized by different types of perfectionism. Participants were randomly assigned to

[☆] This study was preregistered prior to data collection at <https://osf.io/8xayz/>. Data and materials are available at <https://osf.io/wsjy9/>.

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evaluate one potential dating partner described as a self-oriented perfectionist, socially prescribed perfectionist, other-oriented perfectionist, or non-perfectionist. Based on previous research associating perfectionism with unattractive personality traits (Stoeber, 2014) and interpersonal problems (Flett et al., 2001; Hill, Zrull, & Turlington, 1997), they predicted that perfectionist dates would be rated as less attractive than the non-perfectionist date. Indeed, perfectionist dates did receive lower attractiveness ratings than the non-perfectionist date, however, these differences were moderated by participants' own perfectionism. Participants high in self-oriented perfectionism found the perfectionist dates to be more attractive than participants low in self-oriented perfectionism. Participants high in other-oriented perfectionism found the non-perfectionist date to be less attractive and the self-oriented perfectionist date more attractive than participants low in other-oriented perfectionism. These findings suggest that while people do generally see perfectionism in a potential romantic partner as an unattractive characteristic, the degree of perceived unattractiveness is influenced by the individual's own perfectionism.

The HSM study (2015) provided an important first step in understanding how perfectionism influences and is perceived in the context of evaluating potential relationship partners. In the present study, we examine new aspects of how perfectionists are perceived as potential relationship partners and test the generalizability of previous research using a highly-powered within-subjects design. First, we sought to characterize the stereotypes that people hold toward perfectionists. Second, we assessed interest in specific types of relationships to provide a more nuanced account of how perfectionists are perceived as potential relationship partners.

1.1. The stereotype content model

The stereotype content model identifies *warmth* and *competence* as fundamental dimensions of social perception and the stereotypes people hold of others (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Warmth and competence are argued to reflect aspects of social structure: non-competitive others are judged to be warmer than competitive others; high-status others are judged to be more competent than low-status others (Fiske et al., 2002). Cross-cultural studies have supported the generalizability of the stereotype content model (Cuddy et al., 2009), and judgments of warmth and competence have been directly associated with specific emotional responses and patterns of behavior (Cuddy et al., 2008).

Previous research has explored warmth and competence judgments of many specific groups (e.g., middle-class, poor, elderly, homeless, feminists, White, Black, housewives). To our knowledge, none of these studies have specifically assessed judgments of people exemplifying perfectionism or any of its facets. We expected that warmth judgments for perfectionists would be generally consistent with the HSM study attractiveness judgments, with perfectionists being seen as less warm than non-perfectionists. In the context of the stereotype content model, it is plausible that any facet of perfectionism (self-oriented, socially prescribed, or other-oriented) would be seen as highly competitive which would lead to lower ratings of warmth. In contrast, competence ratings across the facets of perfectionism may be less consistent. Whereas socially prescribed perfectionism and other-oriented perfectionism reflect beliefs about other people, self-oriented perfectionism is more closely aligned with an individual's own motivation and behavior and could serve to enhance one's social status. Self-oriented perfectionists may therefore be seen as more competent than socially prescribed or other-oriented perfectionists.

1.2. Relationship duration and investment

Research on human mating strategies suggests that preferences for short-term or long-term relationships are the result of contextual cues that shape what is seen as the optimal mating strategy given one's

current circumstances (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). People are likely to prefer short-term relationships over long-term relationships with perfectionists if perfectionism is an undesirable characteristic in a potential partner. Short-term relationships avoid entangling commitments and may limit the potential negative effects of perfectionism in a relationship.

People also vary in the extent to which they invest resources in their relationships (Rusbult, 1980). Although short-term relationships are often associated with low investment (e.g., Gangestad & Simpson, 2000), relationship duration and investment are conceptually distinct (Wilkey, 2016). For example, a person could be deeply invested in a short-term relationship (e.g., emotionally, financially), or have relatively little investment in a long-term “friends with benefits” relationship. If perfectionism is an undesirable characteristic in potential relationship partners, people may favor low investment relationships over high investment relationships with perfectionists.

1.3. The present research

The present study provides an important test of the generalizability of previous research (Hoffmann et al., 2015) while investigating new aspects of how perfectionists are perceived as potential relationship partners. We used a highly-powered within-subjects design in which each participant evaluated baseline, non-perfectionist, self-oriented perfectionist, socially prescribed perfectionist, and other oriented perfectionist potential relationship partners. Using a within-subjects design allowed us to experimentally control for between-subject variation in ratings and increase statistical power. In addition to assessing general likeability and desire to be in a relationship for each profile, we assessed perceived warmth and competence, and anticipated happiness in a short-term, long-term, low investment, or high investment relationship. To our knowledge, the present study provides the first investigation of the stereotypes people hold toward self-oriented, socially prescribed, and other-oriented perfectionists and is the first to distinguish between short-term, long-term, low investment, and high investment relationships in this context.

Our primary hypothesis was that likeability, desire to be in a relationship, and anticipated happiness across relationship types would be highest for the non-perfectionist profile, followed by the self-oriented perfectionist, socially prescribed perfectionist, then other-oriented perfectionist profiles. Secondary analyses explored ratings of warmth and competence, as well as the extent to which participants' own perfectionism predicted ratings of the perfectionist profiles.

2. Method

Study materials and planned analyses were preregistered prior to data collection at <https://osf.io/8xayz/register/5771ca429ad5a1020de2872e>. The preregistered protocol was followed with a few exceptions as noted in the *Method* section. The final dataset is available at <https://osf.io/ws9j9/>.

2.1. Participants

A planned sample size of 400 participants was established prior to data collection to provide 80% power to detect repeated measures effects of $f = 0.087$, and 95% power to detect repeated measures effect sizes of $f = 0.108$. Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was used to recruit participants from the United States with at least a 90% HIT approval rate. Data collection was terminated after 400 surveys were submitted through MTurk. A total of 426 responses, including incomplete surveys, were received. Following our preregistered data exclusion procedures, incomplete surveys ($n = 25$) and participants who answered “No” to the question “In your honest opinion, should we use your data when analyzing the results of this study?” ($n = 20$) were removed from the dataset, leaving a final sample size of 381 responses (170 female, 210 male, 1 genderqueer). Participant ages ranged from

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