# Moral perfectionism and moral values, virtues, and judgments: Further investigations

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

In a first psychological investigation of moral perfectionism, Yang, Stoeber, and Wang (2015) adapted items from the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale to differentiate perfectionistic personal moral standards and concern over moral mistakes. Examining a sample of Chinese students, Yang et al. found that personal moral standards showed unique positive relationships with moral values, virtues, and judgments, whereas concern over moral mistakes did not. The present study aimed to replicate Yang et al.'s findings in a sample of Western students ($N = 243$), additionally including measures of moral identity and moral disengagement. Furthermore, the study examined whether moral perfectionism explained variance in moral attitudes beyond general perfectionism. Results largely replicated Yang et al.'s findings. Personal moral standards (but not concern over moral mistakes) showed unique positive relationships with moral values, virtues, and judgments and a unique negative relationship with moral disengagement. Furthermore, moral perfectionism explained significant variance in moral attitudes beyond general perfectionism. The present findings suggest that moral perfectionism is a personality characteristic that is relevant in both Asian and Western cultures and explains individual differences in moral attitudes beyond general perfectionism.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Perfectionism dimensions and domains

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality disposition characterized by exceedingly high standards accompanied by concerns over mistakes and other people's evaluations (Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt and Flett, 1991). Factor analytic studies comparing different measures of multidimensional perfectionism consistently find two higher-order dimensions referred to as personal standards perfectionism and evaluative concerns perfectionism (Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, and Winkworth, 2000). Personal standards perfectionism captures the exceedingly high personal standards of perfectionistic people and their striving for perfection. In comparison, evaluative concerns perfectionism captures their concern over mistakes and fear of others' negative evaluations should they fail to live up to their perfectionistic standards (see Stoeber and Otto, 2006, for a review).

Multidimensional perfectionism is often domain-specific (Dunn, Gotwals, and Causgrove Dunn, 2005; McArdle, 2010). Few people high

in perfectionism are perfectionistic in all domains of life (Stoeber and Stoeber, 2009). Consequently, perfectionism research has started to use domain-specific measures of perfectionism to capture individual differences in perfectionism in specific areas of life such as sports, parenting, sexuality, and physical appearance (see Yang, Stoeber, and Wang, 2015, for references). What is more, domain-specific measures of perfectionism have been found to be better predictors of domain-specific characteristics, processes, and outcomes than general measures of perfectionism (Dunn, Craft, Causgrove Dunn, and Gotwals, 2011; Stoeber and Yang, 2015) affirming that research on domain-specific forms of perfectionism is a worthwhile endeavor.

### 1.2. Moral perfectionism

Against this background, Yang et al. (2015) introduced the construct of moral perfectionism as a domain-specific form of perfectionism specifically related to morality. Moral perfectionism has a long tradition in philosophy, but has been largely neglected in psychological research (see Yang et al., 2015, for details). Consequently, Yang et al.'s study was the first psychological investigation of moral perfectionism and its relationships with moral values, virtues, and judgments.

To differentiate personal standards and evaluative concerns aspects of moral perfectionism, Yang et al. (2015) adapted items of the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990) to measure perfectionistic personal moral standards and concern over moral

mistakes. Examining a large sample of Chinese university students, they found both dimensions of moral perfectionism to show positive correlations with moral values, virtues, and judgments. However, when partial correlations controlling for the overlap between the two dimensions were regarded, only personal moral standards continued to show positive relationships with moral values, virtues, and judgments (except for gratitude and indebtedness). In contrast, concern over moral mistakes ceased to show positive relationships (except with indebtedness), but showed a negative relationship with self-reliance (one of the virtues).

Yang et al.'s (2015) findings suggest that moral perfectionism is a domain-specific form of perfectionism that explains individual differences in moral values, virtues, and judgments. In this, the personal standards dimension of moral perfectionism seems to be of primary importance. The evaluative concerns dimension—once it's overlap with the personal standards dimension is controlled for—shows few (if any) positive relationships with moral values, virtues, and judgments, or may even show negative relationships.

Yang et al.'s (2015) study had a number of limitations. First, because it was the first psychological study investigating moral perfectionism, the study was largely exploratory, so the findings should be replicated. Second, Yang et al. (2015) examined Chinese students. Chinese students, however, may have different views of morality than Western students (e.g., Jackson et al., 2008). Moreover, multidimensional perfectionism may show different relationships in Asian and Western students (e.g., Chang, Chang, and Sanna, 2012; Stoeber, Kobori, and Tanno, 2013). Consequently, Yang et al.'s (2015) findings need to be reinvestigated with Western students. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Yang et al. did not measure general perfectionism.[1] Consequently, it is unclear whether their findings are specific to moral perfectionism. To demonstrate the usefulness of moral perfectionism as a psychological construct, it would be important to show that moral perfectionism explains variance in moral values, virtues, and judgments beyond variance explained by general perfectionism.

### 1.3. The present study

Against this background, the present study had two aims. First, it sought to replicate Yang et al.'s (2015) findings in a sample of Western students, including moral identity and moral disengagement in addition to moral values, virtues, and judgments. Second, it examined whether moral perfectionism explained variance in moral attitudes (i.e., moral values, virtues, judgments, identity, and disengagement) beyond variance explained by general perfectionism. In line with Yang et al.'s (2015) findings, we expected personal moral standards and concern over moral mistakes to show different patterns of unique relationships with moral attitudes. Specifically, we expected personal moral standards to show positive relationships with moral values, virtues, judgments, and identity, and a negative relationship with moral disengagement. In contrast, we expected concern over moral mistakes to show nonsignificant or negative relationships with moral values, virtues, judgments, and identity, and a nonsignificant or positive relationship with moral disengagement.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A sample of 243 students (41 men, 202 women) studying at the University of Kent was recruited via the School of Psychology's research participation scheme. Mean age of students was 20.1 years ($SD = 3.8$). Students volunteered to participate for extra course credit or a £50 raffle and completed all measures online using the School's Qualtrics®

platform, which required to respond to all questions to prevent missing data.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Moral perfectionism

To measure moral perfectionism, we followed Yang et al. (2015) and adapted the 16 items from the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS; Frost et al., 1990) capturing personal standards and concern over mistakes to measure moral perfectionism: the Personal Standards subscale items to capture personal moral standards (e.g., "I have extremely high moral standards"), and the Concern over Mistakes subscale items to capture concern over moral mistakes ("I should be upset if I make a moral mistake"). Participants were told that the items reflected moral standards and expectations, and responded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (see Supplementary material, Section 1 for instructions and items).

#### 2.2.2. General perfectionism

To measure general perfectionism, we used the same 16 items from the FMPS in their original form: the Personal Standards items to capture general personal standards ("I have extremely high goals"), and the Concern over Mistakes items to capture general concern over mistakes ("I should be upset if I make a mistake"). Participants were told that the items reflected personal standards and expectations, and responded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

#### 2.2.3. Moral values

To measure moral values, we used the Moral Values subscale of the Adolescents' Values Scale (Chen, 2008; English translation: Yang et al., 2015). The subscale comprised 15 items describing moral values (e.g., honesty, kindness, respect for others). Participants indicated how important these values were to them on a scale from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important).

#### 2.2.4. Virtues

To measure virtues, we used the 48-items Virtues Scale (Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000) capturing empathy ("I am able to sympathize with the feelings of others …"), order ("I keep my things cared for and well ordered …"), resourcefulness ("I have confidence in my skills and abilities …"), and serenity ("I am calm and unruffled …"). Participants were asked to indicate to what degree the items represented their real virtues on a scale from 1 (least like you really are) to 7 (most like you really are).

#### 2.2.5. Forgiveness judgment

To measure forgiveness, we used the forgiveness vignette from Girard and Mullet (1997, p. 212, "Marie-Noelle and Josiane …"). Following Yang et al. (2015), we replaced "sisters" with "classmates" and deleted the social-pressure element and the information that Josiane was promoted eventually. Furthermore, we changed the names to Alex and Sam (which, in Britain, are used for both men and women) to make the vignette gender-neutral (see Supplementary material, Section 2 for details). Participants were asked whether they would forgive Alex if they were Sam, and responded on a scale from 0 (sure − NO) to 10 (sure − YES).

#### 2.2.6. Gratitude judgments

To measure gratitude judgments, we used the gratitude vignette from Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, and Kolts (2006, p. 227, "You have met someone in one of your classes …") describing the situation that a classmate notices that you miss a class, and the next week comes to class with a photocopy of their notes from last week's class for you.[2]

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