



The effect of perfectionism on school burnout among adolescence: The mediator of self-esteem and coping style



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ABSTRACT

Perfectionism is a powerful factor for school burnout, but the underlying mediating mechanism of this relationship remains unclear. To investigate the potential mediating roles of self-esteem and coping style in the association between perfectionism and school burnout among Chinese adolescents, a sample of 1222 middle school students was recruited. Path analysis showed that self-esteem and coping style partially mediated the relationship between perfectionism and school burnout. Specifically, maladaptive perfectionism exerted a positive indirect influence on school burnout through the mediators of self-esteem and task- and emotion-oriented coping styles. In contrast, adaptive perfectionism had a negative indirect effect on school burnout via these same mediators. Notably, self-esteem and emotion-oriented coping style had sequential mediating effects on the relations between the two dimensions of perfectionism and school burnout.

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1. Introduction

School burnout refers to a chronic stress response among students engaged with their schooling, which results from a discrepancy between students' resources and their own or others' expectations of their success in school (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, & Nurmi, 2008). Specifically, it emerges as a response to students' ongoing difficulties in coping with academic stress. School burnout comprises three dimensions: exhaustion at school, cynicism toward the meaning of school, and reduced personal accomplishment (Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2008; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009; Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Studies have shown that students' school burnout was associated with negative developmental outcomes, such as low academic achievement; anxiety, depression, and other psychological distress; and even truancy and dropping out of school (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Rudolph, Lambert, Clark, & Kurlakowsky, 2001). To effectively prevent school burnout, an accurate understanding of its causes is needed. Current evidence suggests that, besides contextual factors such as academic stress and study resources, personality characteristics such as perfectionism are strongly associated with school burnout (Brazeau, 2010; Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that self-esteem and coping style are related to school burnout. However,

no study to date has examined the potential mediating mechanism underlying the effect of perfectionism on school burnout.

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high standards for performance, accompanied by tendencies of excessively critical evaluations of one's behavior. Many empirical studies have been carried out on college and middle school students to investigate perfectionism using the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) developed by Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate (1990). Frost et al. divided perfectionism into dimensions of maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism (Stoeber & Rambow, 2007). Adaptive perfectionism is characterized by high personal standards but less worry about making mistakes (McArdle, 2010). In contrast, maladaptive perfectionism is characterized by a concern over mistakes and persistent doubts about one's actions, socially prescribed perfectionism, a perceived pressure to be perfect, feelings of discrepancy between expectations and results, and negative reactions to imperfections (Wang, Fu, & Rice, 2012). Previous studies have shown that there is a significant correlation between perfectionism and burnout. For example, perfectionists are often unable to achieve their high personal standards, which make them far more prone to burnout compared to others. Research has also revealed that college students with adaptive perfectionism had higher school engagement, while their counterparts with maladaptive perfectionism had higher school burnout (Zhang et al., 2007; Ulu, Tezer, & Slaney, 2012). Chen et al. found that, in adolescent athletes, maladaptive perfectionism positively predicted burnout while adaptive perfectionism negatively predicted it (Chen, Kee, Chen, & Tsai, 2008).

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Slade and Owens (1998) proposed a dual process model of perfectionism to explain why its two dimensions (adaptive and maladaptive) have different consequences. Briefly, the two types of perfectionist receive different types of reinforcement—positive or negative—from their actions, which lead to different cognitive processes and emotional states. Specifically, adaptive perfectionists tend to pursue success and internalize their perfectionism into their self-concept. Additionally, when faced with adverse situations, adaptive perfectionists usually use a task-oriented coping style. This explains why adaptive perfectionism is positively related to positive outcomes (Ashby & Rice, 2002; Stoeber & Rambow, 2007) and negatively related to negative outcomes (Hill, Hall, & Appleton, 2010). On the contrary, maladaptive perfectionists often make considerable effort to avoid mediocrity or failure, and tend to employ depressive emotion-oriented coping strategies. This suggests why maladaptive perfectionism shows inverse relationships with various negative (Beevers, 2005; Burns, Dittmann, Nguyen, & Mitchelson, 2000) and positive outcomes (Zhang et al., 2007).

According to the dual process model, perfectionism first influences individuals' self-appraisal. Self-esteem, an important component of the self-concept system, may also be influenced by perfectionism. Indeed, this association might be rather strong: For example, in a study of Iranian students, Besharat (2009) showed that adaptive perfectionism is positively correlated with self-esteem, while maladaptive perfectionism is negatively correlated with it. Elion et al. found that adaptive perfectionists have higher self-esteem and lower depression than do maladaptive perfectionists among students in the United States (Elion, Wang, Slaney, & French, 2012). Furthermore, some research has indicated that self-esteem was negatively associated with all three dimensions of burnout, especially with emotional exhaustion (e.g., Janssen, Schaufeli, & Houkes, 1999). Individuals with low self-esteem may be suspicious of their own ability, sensitive to failure, and prone to experience setback, and may eventually develop burnout (Orth, Robins, Trzesniewski, Maes, & Schmitt, 2009). Additionally, self-esteem may play a mediating role between perfectionism and various behavior outcomes (Blankstein, Dunkley, & Wilson, 2008; Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998).

As per the dual process model, perfectionism can also have an effect on coping style. Coping style is the way in which an individual tends to manage taxing demands with regard to stressful events. It can be roughly divided into two categories: task-oriented coping, which refers to active attempts to deal with stress/stressful events, and emotion-oriented coping, defined as strategies such as rumination or excessive emotional response (Endler & Parker, 1990). There are several studies that have theoretically and empirically demonstrated associations between both dimensions of perfectionism and emotion- and task-oriented coping (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003; Flett, Russo, & Hewitt, 1994). Research has also verified close correlations of coping style with perfectionism and burnout (Kokkonen, Cheston, Dallos, & Smart, 2013). Moreover, two studies have suggested that coping style could be a mediator in the relationship between perfectionism and burnout. For example, Hill et al. (2010) noted that task-oriented and emotion-oriented mediated the effects of self-oriented or socially prescribed perfectionism on athlete burnout, while Chang (2011) found that emotion-oriented coping mediated the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and burnout. Self-esteem is also associated with coping style: High self-esteem is related to task-oriented coping, whereas low self-esteem is associated with emotion-oriented coping (Cawood & Huprich, 2011; Xu et al., 2013).

Taken together, previous studies have confirmed that both self-esteem and coping style relate to perfectionism and burnout. However, it remains unknown whether different coping styles and self-esteem correlate with both dimensions of perfectionism (maladaptive and adaptive) and school burnout. Particularly, non studies have simultaneously considered the relationships of both self-esteem and coping style with perfectionism and burnout in a single study. Notably, cognitive appraisal theory has regarded cognitive appraisals (e.g., self-

esteem, self-concept) and coping as two separate processes, although both are considered critical mediators of the relationships between personality traits, the environment, and various outcomes. Thus, investigating the mediating roles of both self-esteem and coping style simultaneously could help us deepen our understanding of the mechanism underlying the relationship between perfectionism and school burnout. Therefore, the present study aimed to examine these relationships among Chinese middle school students. Based on previous findings, the present study hypothesized that the relationships between the two dimensions of perfectionism and school burnout were sequentially mediated by self-esteem and the two forms of coping style (task-oriented and emotion-oriented) (Fig. 1). The specific hypotheses are presented as follows:

Hypothesis 1. Maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism have different effects on school burnout.

Hypothesis 2. Different coping styles and self-esteem are simple mediators in the relationship between perfectionism and school burnout. Self-esteem and emotion-oriented or task-oriented coping are sequential mediators in the association between perfectionism and school burnout.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The survey was carried out among 1230 randomly selected students from one middle school in Xi'an city, China. We deleted data with more than 10% missing items, and ultimately 1222 (99.67%) valid questionnaires were collected. The average age of the participants was 13.2 (SD = 1.2) years (range 12–16 years). In this sample, there were 640 boys and 582 girls.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

Perfectionism was measured using the Chinese version of the FMPS, which was translated by Cheng, Chong, and Wong (1999). The FMPS comprises 27 items in 5 subscales. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 ("totally disagree") to 5 ("totally agree"). The subscales of doubts about actions, concerns over mistakes, and parental expectations are measures of maladaptive perfectionism, while the subscales of organization and personal standards are measures of adaptive perfectionism. Cheng et al. (1999) reported adequate Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all five subscales (doubts about actions 0.67, concerns over mistakes 0.83, parental expectations 0.74, organization 0.73, and personal standards 0.64).

2.2.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem was assessed by the Chinese version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Wu, 2008). The scale comprises ten items scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree"). The RSES has demonstrated good psychometric properties (Wu, 2008; Liu, Wang, Zhou, & Li, 2014).

2.2.3. School burnout

School burnout was assessed using the Chinese version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Student Survey (MBI-SS) (Hu & Schaufeli, 2009). The scale comprises 15 items in three subscales: emotional exhaustion, cynicism toward the meaning of school (hereafter, "cynicism"), and reduced personal accomplishment. Participants responded to all items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("completely disagree") to 7 ("completely agree"). In Hu and Schaufeli's study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment showed ranges of 0.60–0.69,

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