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The relation between perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation and coping strategies in medical employees

Barbara Crăciun^{*}, Diana Paula Dudău

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Bucharest University, Șos. Panduri nr. 90, sector 5, Bucharest, 050656, Romania

Abstract

Perfectionism is a personality trait that interferes in a complex manner with all aspects of human life. The purpose of this study was to investigate the coping strategies that the medical employees with high levels of trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation tendencies generally apply in dealing with stressful situations. A sample of 60 participants ($M_{age} = 38.6$; $SD = 9.42$) completed self-report measures of perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation strategies and coping responses. Overall, our findings revealed that the medical employees preoccupied to present a perfect image of themselves might also tend to be characterized by trait perfectionism and to avoid seeking social support. Moreover, men seemed to have a more accentuated tendency to promote flawless personal traits and to not disclose their own imperfection to others, compared to women.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism has been studied extensively in relation to health and psychological problems and with regards to the developmental patterns that may influence its occurrence (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Although in the literature there is an impressive number of studies that have revealed an association between perfectionism and many psychological problems, nowadays the most commonly accepted definition of perfectionism implies the fact that perfectionism is a

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: 0721.261.281.

E-mail address: barbaracraciun@yahoo.com

multidimensional construct, with some dimensions being more positive than others, rather than a one-dimensional dysfunctional or maladaptive trait, as the early theorists like Burns (1980) had stated. The conceptual shift occurred in the 1990s with the groups of studies conducted independently by Frost et al. (1990) and Hewitt & Flett (1991) who proposed two different multidimensional models of perfectionism along with suitable measurement instruments.

In this study, we opted for Hill et al. (2004) multidimensional model because, as the authors stated, it may offer a more comprehensive description of perfectionism, compared to Frost et al. (1990) six-facet model, or to Hewitt & Flett (1991) three-facet one, and it may not imply the overlapping characteristics that could result if these two models were considered together.

However, considering the fact that a dimensional approach might be superior to a categorical approach (Broman-Fulks et al., 2008) and that an analysis based on separate dimensions might be more relevant than one based on higher order factors (Hill et al., 2004), we argue that the discussion regarding the possibility that some dimensions could reflect, at least in some cases, a more positive side of perfectionism than others, still remains open. In addition, we emphasize the importance of not neglecting the possible mediator or moderator variables in studying and understanding the relation between different dimensions or forms of perfectionism and various constructs relevant for the adaptive-maladaptive perfectionism debate.

One such intermediate variable might be coping strategies defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts that the person takes in order to manage the external and/or internal demands appraised as taxing or exceeding the personal resources, without regard to their efficiency or value (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus (1999) stated that coping is a powerful mediator between stressful encounter and the resulted emotional response and that clarifying the way it operates is fundamental to understanding the individuals' struggle to adapt to life stressors. These affirmations are consistent with our argumentation regarding the importance of coping as a possible intermediate variable in debating the adaptive-maladaptive perfectionism dilemma and emphasize the utility that research on perfectionists' coping strategies might have, mainly because of the numerous results that have revealed an important relation between perfectionism and stress (e.g., D'Souza et al., 2011; Hewitt & Flett, 1993)

Hill et al. (2010) showed that the positive association between socially prescribed perfectionism and athlete burnout was mediated by avoidant coping, while the negative association between self-oriented perfectionism and athlete burnout was mediated by problem-focused coping.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the fact that the way perfectionists use different coping strategies might also be affected by the intervention of other variables, such as the tendency to apply a perfectionistic self-presentation strategy that could be relevant especially for coping strategies that imply social support. This concept proposed by Hewitt et al. (2003) as a distinct facet of perfectionism, reflects the differences between perfectionists regarding their need to appear perfect. Various research revealed that perfectionistic self-presentation correlated positively with distress (Hewitt et al., 2008), negative problem-solving orientation (Besser et al., 2010), social disconnection and fearful attachment (Chen et al., 2012) and mediated the negative relation between perfectionistic concerns and subjective well-being (Mackinnon & Sherry, 2012).

Considering this short review of the previous research, the objective of our study was to further investigate the coping strategies that the medical employees with high levels of trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation tendencies usually apply in dealing with stressful situations. We aimed to present a simple analysis of the correlations between these three variables, depending on gender, as a starting point for future research with a more complex design.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The present study involved a number of 60 participants, aged between 27 and 55 years old ($M_{age} = 38.6$; $SD = 9.42$), employees of a private medical clinic in Bucharest, who voluntarily responded to our request displayed on the institution's board. Subsequently, participants were distributed in two groups according to gender ($n = 30$ women; $n = 30$ males). All participants were guaranteed the confidentiality of their data and were explained that the tests are part of a research related to attitudes, expectations and functional resources.

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