



On the differential relationships involving perfectionism and academic adjustment: The mediating role of passion and affect



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to shed light on the paradoxical relationships between perfectionism and academic adjustment. It was proposed that the positive relationship between self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) and academic adjustment is due to harmonious passion (HP) for one's studies, which triggers positive affect. Conversely, it is proposed obsessive passion (OP) for studies, through negative affect, mediates the negative relationship of both SOP and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) with academic adjustment. These hypotheses were supported in two studies. Furthermore, Study 2 revealed that the *positive* effects of SOP are due to striving for perfection, a facet of SOP (Campbell & Di Paula, 2002). In contrast, the *negative* relationship between SOP and academic adjustment is due to the importance of being perfect (another facet of SOP). Results provide insights on the role of perfectionism in academic adjustment and yield implications for the field of educational psychology.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism entails aspiring to perfection. Two types of perfectionism have been identified (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Namely, one can pursue perfectionism as something that is self-oriented (self-oriented perfectionism; SOP) or as imposed by others (socially prescribed perfectionism; SPP). Over the past two decades or so, much research has focused on the role of perfectionism in academic adjustment. To this day, a heated debate still rages in the scientific literature regarding the adaptive nature of perfectionism in academic settings. On the one hand, perfectionism has been linked with indices of maladjustment in the academic domain, such as low levels of academic performance and psychological well-being (Bong, Hwang, Noh, & Kim, 2014; Miquelon, Vallerand, Grouzet, & Cardinal, 2005; Verner-Filion & Gaudreau, 2010). On the other hand, researchers have shown that perfectionism in the academic domain sometimes leads to desirable outcomes, such as high levels of performance and psychological well-being (Bong et al., 2014; Miquelon et al., 2005; Verner-Filion & Gaudreau, 2010). Although such research typically reveals that SPP predicts negative, and SOP positive, academic adjustment, two issues remain. First, these findings have been inconsistent. Specifically, SOP sometimes has been found to predict negative effects (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Second, the nature of the

mediating variables responsible for these differential effects has received little empiric attention.

It is proposed herein that perfectionism will lead one to invest greatly in one's area of expertise thereby inducing a passion for such activities to the extent that they include some interesting features. Thus, passion should represent an important mediator of the effects of perfectionism on outcomes. Further, as will be made clearer in a later section, because of the different types of psychological mechanisms that they entail, two types of passion (harmonious and obsessive) and related processes should be responsible for the adaptive or maladaptive forms of adjustment associated with perfectionism. It is this thesis that is being developed below.

1.1. On perfectionism

Perfectionism is a complex and multidimensional personality construct (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The various aspects of perfectionism are differentiated on the basis of their origin (e.g., self vs. social) and their cognitive manifestations (e.g., high standards, doubts about action, etc.). For instance, Hewitt and Flett (1991) have distinguished between the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of perfectionism. Specifically, *self-oriented perfectionism* (SOP) represents the self-imposed tendency to strive toward perfection by establishing high standards upon which a person evaluates and defines him/herself. In contrast, *socially prescribed perfectionism* (SPP) is built around the perception that significant others are exerting pressure to be perfect, to the extent that very high standards

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of excellence must be achieved for the person to feel valued by significant others.

The adaptive vs. the maladaptive nature of perfectionism has led to much research in the educational literature. Such research reveals that the two types of perfectionism tend to lead to differential effects on academic adjustment. On the one hand, there is now clear evidence that SPP (and other dimensions known to be conceptually related to SPP, such as doubts about action and concerns over mistakes) predicts a host of negative outcomes related to academic adjustment. Specifically, SPP has been repeatedly associated with high levels of negative affect (Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003), depression (Flett, Besser, Hewitt, & Davis, 2007), anxiety (Bong et al., 2014), stress (Ashby, Noble, & Gnilka, 2012), and low levels of performance (Verner-Filion & Gaudreau, 2010) in the academic domain.

On the other hand, the status of SOP (and other dimensions known to be conceptually related to SOP, such as high standards and personal standards) remains equivocal. Studies in the academic domain have shown that SOP positively predicts negative outcomes such as depression and stress (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), as well as positive outcomes like positive affect (Frost et al., 1993), subjective well-being (Miquelon et al., 2005), life satisfaction (Ashby et al., 2012), and achievement-related outcomes, such as academic performance (Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002). Other studies have also shown that SOP is either unrelated (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004) or negatively related (Ashby et al., 2012) to facets of emotional distress, such as depression, anxiety and stress. The equivocal results obtained in past research regarding the status of SOP in academic adjustment thus highlight the importance of studying the mediating variables that could explain when SOP leads to adaptive outcomes and when it predicts maladaptive academic consequences.

1.2. From perfectionism to outcomes: the mediating role of passion

1.2.1. From perfectionism to passion

As mentioned previously, perfectionism entails engaging intensively in activities in order to attain the high standards set for oneself. Perfectionistic individuals will thus display a strong commitment toward attaining perfection. By devoting an important quantity of energy and effort in their quest for perfection, both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionists are likely to develop a preference for certain activities in which they are involved over time. Individuals will experience self-growth in such activities and eventually develop expertise. These activities can end up being internalized in the person's identity, to the extent that they are highly valued and meaningful for the person (Deci, Egharri, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). Such activities become passionate for the individual.

The Dualistic Model of Passion (DMP; Vallerand, 2015; Vallerand et al., 2003) defines passion as a strong inclination toward an activity that is important, liked (or even loved), and in which a significant amount of time and energy is invested. These activities come to be so self-defining that they represent central features of one's identity. For example, passionate individuals who strongly value their studies will define themselves as "students". The DMP further proposes the existence of two types of passion, namely harmonious passion (HP) and obsessive passion (OP). These two types of passion can be differentiated in terms of how the passionate activity has been internalized into one's identity and self. On the one hand, HP is derived from an autonomous internalization of this activity in the self. This internalization process occurs when individuals freely accept the activity and choose to engage in their passionate activity without any contingency attached to it (Mageau, Carpentier, & Vallerand, 2011). Furthermore, it produces a motivational force to engage in the activity willingly and engenders a sense of volition and personal endorsement about pursuing the activity. With HP, the activity occupies a significant, but not overpowering, space in one's identity. Therefore, the activity remains under the control of the individual and in harmony with other important life aspects (Séguin-

Lévesque, Laliberté, Pelletier, Blanchard, & Vallerand, 2003). Subsequently, students with a HP for their studies are able to decide when to and when not to engage in their studies. This is because they remain in control over their involvement in their studies. Thus, behavioral engagement in their studies can be seen as flexible.

On the other hand, OP results from a controlled internalization of the activity into one's identity and self. A controlled internalization originates from intra and/or interpersonal pressure typically because certain contingencies are attached to the activity, such as feelings of social acceptance or self-esteem, or because the sense of excitement derived from activity engagement is uncontrollable (Mageau et al., 2011). With OP, the activity becomes a part of one's identity because it is loved, but also because it brings other more extrinsic benefits, such as a boost of self-esteem or social rewards (Lafrenière, St-Louis, Vallerand, & Donahue, 2011; Mageau et al., 2011). Consequently, students with an OP can find themselves in the position of experiencing an uncontrollable urge to partake in their studies. They cannot help but to engage in their studies as it is beyond one's control. Therefore, students with an OP display a rigid persistence, even when activity engagement is inappropriate (Vallerand et al., 2003). With OP everything gravitates around one's passion, which leads to many self-regulatory challenges such as conflicts with other life domains (Séguin-Lévesque et al., 2003), susceptibility to threat and defensiveness (Donahue, Rip, & Vallerand, 2009; Rip, Vallerand, & Lafrenière, 2012), as well as frustration and rumination about the activity when prevented from engaging in it (Mageau et al., 2011; Mageau, Vallerand, Rousseau, Ratelle, & Provencher, 2005). Consequently, OP may come at a cost for students, potentially leading to less than optimal functioning within the confines of their studies because of the lack of flexibility that it entails.

Researchers have started to explore the links between perfectionism and passion. For instance, Slade and Owens (1998) have suggested that SOP is driven by a desire to attain the ideal self, whilst SPP is fueled by a fear of unwanted outcomes, such as failure. However, other researchers have argued that Slade and Owens's position is incomplete. Specifically, Flett and Hewitt (2006) suggested that SOP is also fueled by fear of failure, thus explaining the equivocal results concerning the adaptive nature of SOP. The Dualistic Model of Passion also states that HP is associated with a desire to attain the ideal self, whereas OP is related to fear of failure (Bélanger, Lafrenière, Vallerand, & Kruglanski, 2013; Bonneville-Roussy, Lavigne, & Vallerand, 2011; Vallerand et al., 2007, 2008). In light of the above, one would therefore expect links between SOP and both HP and OP, as well as between SPP and OP. Initial support for the associations between perfectionism and passion has shown that SOP leads to both HP and OP, while SPP is related to OP (Curran, Hill, Jowett, & Mallinson, 2014; Padham & Aujla, 2014). Thus, it is proposed that passion for one's studies is key in understanding the adaptive nature of perfectionism, especially when the latter stems from the self.

1.2.2. On the differential relationships between passion and outcomes

The two types of passion have been found to lead to different predictions with respect to various outcomes. Passion has also been found to relate to other outcomes, including some of importance for the realm of education. More specifically, research shows that HP is positively associated with psychological adjustment indicators such as life satisfaction, meaning in life, and vitality, while being negatively related to negative indices such as anxiety and depression; opposite relationships are observed with OP (see Vallerand, 2015 for a review). Finally, past research also suggests that both types of passion are positively related to academic performance (e.g., Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011; Vallerand et al., 2007, 2008).

Of importance, research has also revealed that much of the effects of passion on outcomes are mediated by positive emotions. One theory that explains the role of emotions in outcomes is the Broaden-and-Build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). This theory posits that the experience of positive emotions is key in allowing individuals to reach their optimal functioning. This is because positive emotions allow the individual to

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