



When perfectionism is coupled with low achievement: The effects on academic engagement and help seeking in middle school



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ABSTRACT

With a sample of 169 middle school students, the current study examined how two dimensions of perfectionism (i.e., personal standards [PS] and concern over mistakes [COM]) are related to academic engagement and help seeking behavior among peers in math classes. After controlling for gender and math achievement, COM was unrelated to most outcome variables but was positively related to avoidance of help seeking. This pattern was stronger among students with low PS. While PS was related to a desirable pattern of engagement (i.e., higher behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and adaptive help seeking among peers), this was not the case for low-achieving students. Although modest in magnitude, the significant interactions suggested that PS did not buffer low-achieving students against expedient help seeking and disruptive behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a personality disposition, which involves the tendency to strive for challenging goals and evaluate one's performance in an overly critical manner (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Despite various labels across different research programs, some degree of consensus among researchers regarding the advantages and disadvantages of perfectionism sub-dimensions has emerged. Yet, the field has not reached a firm conclusion over this issue, calling for further research. We heed this call and address a few important issues that have been under-examined in the perfectionism literature.

First, although much of the perfectionism literature has focused on psychological well-being, we extend the literature by focusing on the potential association between perfectionism and academic functioning. Perfectionism, by definition, involves attitudes (i.e., views toward making errors) and behaviors (i.e., goal setting) that can impact academic performance. There have been studies that examined academic motivation in relation to perfectionism (e.g., Bong, Hwang, Noh, & Kim, 2014; Fletcher & Speirs Neumeister, 2012; Stoeber & Rambow, 2007), but relatively less attention has been paid to how

perfectionism characteristics are related to classroom engagement behavior.

Second, we are considering student achievement level as a potential moderator. Perfectionism among high-achieving students has received much attention from perfectionism researchers, as reflected by many case studies and opinion pieces written by teachers or researchers working with high ability students (e.g., Adelson, 2007; LoCicero & Ashby, 2000; Parker & Mills, 1996). However, there is no strong empirical support in the literature for perfectionism being more prevalent among high performing students. Also, the studies with giftedness foci tend to study samples drawn from honor's colleges or gifted programs. Yet, such practices fail to properly differentiate high ability from high achievement, as not all high ability students are high achievers. In addition, perfectionism does not always lead to high performance (Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003), depending on the type of perfectionism that individuals possess and how perfectionism tendencies are channeled.

Another issue in need of consideration is that all of the currently available assessment tools for perfectionism are self-report questionnaires. Thus, academically struggling students can self-proclaim their perfectionistic tendencies, which may or may not be an accurate reflection of objective reality (see Stoeber & Hotham, 2013 for an interesting and related issue). However, self-reported/self-proclaimed perfectionism is important, as it reflects the students' beliefs about themselves, which can subsequently shape their actual behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Despite these limitations, achievement level has frequently been

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considered as an outcome variable and rarely has been examined as a potential mediator or moderator of the effects of perfectionism. Thus, it has yet to be determined whether a potential maladaptive function of perfectionism is observed equally among high vs. low achieving students.

Third, we are seeking to extend the construct of academic engagement. In addition to commonly used indicators of engagement behaviors in classroom settings (e.g., emotional engagement, behavioral engagement, and disruptive behavior), we investigated academic help seeking around peers. Often in the classroom, students encounter problems that they cannot solve on their own and, as a result, are in need of help. Academic help seeking is an important and effective self-regulatory strategy, as compared to other alternatives (e.g., giving up and sitting passively, writing down a random answer, etc.). Nonetheless, adolescent developmental researchers have documented that many early adolescents tend to avoid asking for help even when they need it (Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005). For more self-conscious early adolescents, the psychological costs of help seeking (e.g., embarrassment or feelings of indebtedness) often outweigh the benefits (e.g., understanding academic content or getting the right answer). Given that support and the frequent exchange of ideas are the core premise of constructivist approaches to education, academic help seeking is an important topic for early adolescents' academic adjustment. In addition, researching academic help-seeking behaviors provides important opportunities to examine how perfectionistic adolescents *socially* deal with *academically* challenging situations. Academic help seeking may mean public acknowledgments of incompetence, which may be particularly threatening for perfectionistic individuals who are concerned about making mistakes.

In sum, the current study will add to the existing perfectionism literature, which offers limited data on the relationships between perfectionism and academic engagement behaviors in the classroom during adolescence. In the current study, we examined individual forms of academic engagement as well as social forms of engagement (i.e., help seeking); with special attention given to variations across high and low achieving students. Although the current study is correlational in nature, it will provide initial data to spark further inquiries on how perfectionistic tendencies may affect students with varying levels of academic ability.

2. Definitions of perfectionism

Perfectionism is a multifaceted personality characteristic that has been associated with various outcomes, such as psychological health, achievement, and motivation (e.g., Bong et al., 2014; Ghorban Dordinejad & Nasab, 2013). A consensus has emerged that perfectionism strivings (sub-dimension related to striving for perfection and setting exceedingly high standards of performance, e.g., self-oriented perfectionism, personal standards, positive perfectionism, and striving for perfection) have not shown strong associations with maladaptive outcomes, and sometimes have been linked to adaptive outcomes, while other dimensions (sub-dimensions involving excessive concerns for mistakes or imperfection, e.g., socially-prescribed perfectionism, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, negative perfectionism, discrepancy, and negative reactions to imperfection) have been consistently linked to maladaptive outcomes (see Fletcher & Speirs Neumeister, 2012 and Stoeber & Otto, 2006 for reviews). In addition to the similarities in the observed effects, some of these dimensions tend to load on a single construct when subjected to factor analysis, suggesting that substantial overlaps exist among these constructs (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, & Mattia, 1993). We refer to the constructs in the first category as perfectionistic strivings and those in the second category as perfectionistic concerns in this paper for brevity when reviewing the literature.

3. Perfectionism and academic engagement during early adolescence

Perfectionistic concerns are expected to hamper academic engagement, as excessive concerns over mistakes could distract students from fully concentrating on the task at hand and may lead to self-sabotaging behaviors. The consistent empirical evidence on other related outcomes (e.g., academic motivation, burnout, see Shih, 2011, 2012) supports such prediction.

Perfectionistic strivings are likely to promote academic engagement. The inherent inclination to set high standards, and the desire to strive to meet them, may lead students to work hard and persevere. Much of the research linking perfectionistic strivings to intrinsic motivation (e.g., mastery goals, intrinsic motivation, self-determined motivation, see Fletcher & Speirs Neumeister, 2012) supports this view. However, this same tendency may be destructive, as excessively high and unrealistic standards hamper optimal engagement by creating compulsion, lower optimism about goal success (Eddington, 2014), and a fear of failure (Shafran & Mansell, 2001). The standards set by perfectionists are often beyond their reach, creating circumstances in which they increase the odds of failure. Such extremely high goals do not provide adequate levels of challenge, which is necessary to derive maximum effort (Locke & Latham, 2006). Instead, it may promote procrastination by increasing anxiety. Such ironic patterns reflect a possible failure in self-regulation, which has often been observed among perfectionistic individuals in the academic domain (Bieling et al., 2003; Eddington, 2014). Thus, the relationship between perfectionistic strivings and engagement does not seem to be simple or straightforward. In the current study, we examined emotional engagement (e.g., enjoying the task), behavioral engagement (e.g., paying attention and working hard; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009), and disruptive behavior (e.g., breaking classroom rules, annoying the teachers; Kaplan, Gheen, & Midgley, 2002). These three dimensions of academic engagement are expected to capture students' classroom behaviors from different angles.

4. Perfectionism and academic help seeking around peers

Students often encounter academic problems that they cannot solve independently. Such unresolved questions can leave a gap in students' knowledge and eventually compromise long-term achievement (Newman, 2000). Students often turn to their peers for help (Altermatt, Pomerantz, Ruble, Frey, & Greulich, 2002) for multiple reasons: a) A teacher-student ratio in a typical middle school classroom puts a cap on the availability of students utilizing the teacher as an academic resource, b) peers tend to be seen as less judgmental or threatening (Butler, 1998) and are often sought after due to the emotional bond among students that it produces (Ryan & Shim, 2012), and c) peers often provide explanations in a language that is easily understandable to students (Webb, 1991). Despite the importance of peers as learning partners, few studies have examined the personality factors that may be linked to help seeking around classroom peers.

We examined three forms of help-seeking behaviors: a) avoidance of help seeking when its use is clearly needed (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998; Ryan et al., 2005), b) adaptive help seeking, which involves genuine interest in learning and intention to promote future independent performance (i.e., asking for explanation, clues, or examples so that one can understand and solve the problem on her own in the future), and c) expedient help seeking, which represents little interest in learning and an intention to delegate one's work to others (e.g., asking for a ready-made answer without explanation). Quite predictably, adaptive help seeking is related to a host of adaptive learning outcomes while expedient help seeking is related to maladaptive motivation and poor long-term achievement (Butler, 1998; Karabenick, 2011; Karabenick & Berger, 2013; Nelson-Le Gall, 1985; Newman, 2000; Ryan & Shim, 2012). However, avoidance of help seeking is rather common among adolescents (Ryan et al., 2005) and help requests directed toward a peer, as compared to a teacher, often take an expedient

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