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Can it be good to set the bar high? The role of motivational regulation in moderating the link from high standards to academic well-being

Thuy-vy T. Nguyen *, Edward L. Deci

University of Rochester in Rochester, New York, United States

ABSTRACT

This study explored a motivational approach to examining individuals' perfectionistic strivings, using Self-Determination Theory as the theoretical foundation. Data were collected from 384 undergraduate students. Hierarchical multilevel models were performed to examine whether the association between the tendency to set high personal standards and learning outcomes would be moderated by people's type of motivational regulation. The results indicated that the striving for high standards was associated with less adaptive learning experiences when students experienced controlled regulation around their behaviors. We measured controlled regulation both as a personality orientation, and as students' reasons for participating in each of their classes. We found convergent evidence at both the between-person and the within-person, between-class levels that when students reported low controlled regulation, those who tended to set high standards for themselves reported less anxiety and difficulty in their learning, and more learning progress in their classes than the students who set low standards.

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1. Introduction

Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) conceptualized perfectionism as a multidimensional personality trait that is composed of six unique components. According to this group of researchers, perfectionists are characterized as people who strive for extremely high standards, are obsessively concerned over making mistakes, experience constant self-doubts, tend to be overly organized, often experience high internalized parental expectations, and grow up facing a lot of parental criticisms. Among those components, the element that pertains to perfectionists' tendency to set high personal standards has recently spurred debates among researchers, mainly around the question of whether setting high standards can be the positive aspect of perfectionism (see a review by Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Researchers have often referred to this aspect of perfectionism as Personal Standards Perfectionism (PSP).

Recent research showed that, when individuals set high standards for themselves, they tended to endorse mastery goals instead of performance goals, show greater self-determined motivation for school, achieve higher grades, cheat and procrastinate less, and show lower academic burnout (Bong, Hwang, Noh, & Kim, 2014; Chang, Lee, Byeon, & Lee, 2015; Harvey et al., 2015; Thorpe & Netteelbeck, 2014). Nonetheless, at the same time, other studies also reported that setting high standards showed positive zero-order correlations with stress, anxiety, self-

blame, and extrinsic motivation for school, such as studying to earn high grades and social approval (e.g., Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, & Winkworth, 2000; Enns, Cox, Sareen, & Freeman, 2001; Hill et al., 2004; McArdle & Duda, 2004; Mills & Blankstein, 2000; Miquelon, Vallerand, Grouzet, & Cardinal, 2005; Van Yperen, 2006). Therefore, the topic of whether PSP constitutes the adaptive aspect of perfectionism has remained highly debatable.

1.1. The links of PSP to psychological outcomes

Attempting to clarify when setting high standards would likely be adaptive and when it might turn awry, several researchers have investigated different moderation models that might explain the strength and direction of the varied links of PSP to positive and negative outcomes. The most prominent attempt has been a recent formulation of the 2 × 2 model by Gaudreau and Thompson (2010), using maladaptive components of perfectionism, commonly referred to as Evaluative Concerns Perfectionism (ECP), as a moderator of the links of PSP to well-being outcomes. Studies that tested this model in the academic domain showed that, when setting high standards was accompanied by high perfectionistic concerns (i.e., high PSP, high ECP), there was lower performance, decreased academic self-determination and academic satisfaction, as well as less goal progress than when setting high standards was accompanied by low evaluative perfectionistic concerns (i.e., high PSP, low ECP) (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; Franche, Gaudreau, & Miranda, 2012).

Other moderation models also provided evidence to suggest that the effect of trait PSP on outcomes could be moderated by malleable

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Clinical and Social Sciences of Psychology, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14610, United States.
E-mail address: thuy-vy.nguyen@rochester.edu (T.T. Nguyen).

variables. Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, and Mosher (1995) found that setting high personal standards while experiencing greater life stress predicted higher depressive symptoms. Another study by Chang, Sanna, Chang, and Bodem (2008) found that high standard perfectionism was associated with greater depressive and anxious symptoms when accompanied by the experience of loneliness and isolation. In a study by Dunkley et al. (2000), setting high standards was associated with greater psychological distress for those who reported more perceived hassles in their lives, but the direction of this association was reversed for those who reported having greater social support. Overall, those findings suggested that PSP could yield either benign or adaptive outcomes in the absence of either personal (e.g., loneliness) or contextual (e.g., life stress, perceived hassles) stressors. In the current study we chose to examine personal motivation stressors to determine whether a high level of stressful motivation would yield relations between PSP and poor academic outcomes (e.g., anxiety, difficulties in learning, and poor progress in courses), whereas a low level of stressful motivation would yield relations between PSP and more positive academic outcomes.

1.2. The moderation of PSP by self-determination-theory variables

To examine the extent to which the relations of trait PSP to educational well-being outcomes would be moderated by personal motivation variables, we used the Self-Determination Theory concept of controlled regulation as both a between-person and a within-person possible moderator (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Controlled regulation involves people engaging in behaviors either to get rewards and avoid punishments (i.e., external regulation) or to feel social approval and to avoid feeling guilty or worthlessness (i.e., introjected regulation). Within SDT this controlled type of motivation can be examined as either a general personality orientation or as a state variable that concerns the reasons for engaging in a specific behavior or a domain of behaviors.

Numerous studies over the past 30 years have shown that controlled motivational regulation—that is, behaving primarily to earn rewards, to compensate for damaged self-esteem, or to avoid punishment, guilt, or anxiety—has been associated with ill-being variables, particularly those in academic and goal striving domain, such as test anxiety, poor learning quality, and academic dissatisfaction at both personality orientation and state levels of analysis (e.g., Black & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Koestner et al., 2006; Ratelle, Guay, Vallerand, Larose, & Senecal, 2007, Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). Among those studies, a few have also examined the relations between PSP and controlled regulation. For example, participants who were high in PSP also tended to be high in controlled regulation but only when they were also high in maladaptive perfectionism (McArdle & Duda, 2004). So this suggests that there are some connections among PSP, controlled regulation, and maladaptive responding (McArdle & Duda, 2004; Mills & Blankstein, 2000; Miquelon et al., 2005; Van Yperen, 2006). Although these results do not provide any direct support for our hypotheses, they do suggest some relations among these variables. As such, we will consider whether controlled motivational regulation for behaviors, particularly in the academic domain, would influence the relations of personal standard perfectionism to negative outcomes.

2. The present study

In the present study, we focus on the role of more versus less controlled regulation in modifying the link of PSP and academic well-being outcomes. We hypothesized that when students approached their learning with higher controlled regulation, setting high personal standards would be linked to negative outcomes while showing no association with positive outcomes. On the other hand, with lower controlled regulation, the associations between setting high standards with negative outcomes would be null or negative, and the link from setting high standards to positive outcomes would be positive.

There is no doubt that setting high standards boosts performance and confidence (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003; Enns et al., 2001; Nounopoulos, Ashby, & Gilman, 2006; Seo, 2008). Nonetheless, as is examined in the present study, the pursuits of high standards might come at the cost of academic well-being if the individuals regulate themselves with controls. We operationalize academic well-being by targeting students' learning experiences in three different courses that they were taking during a semester. As outcomes, we examined how much progress students perceived they were making in their learning, independent of their objective performance (i.e., grades), the extent to which they experienced anxiety while studying, and how much difficulties they had while processing class materials. Those were the same outcomes that have been studied in previous studies (Koestner et al., 2006; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010) to assess students' emotional and cognitive experiences during their pursuits of academic goals.

3. Method

3.1. Procedure

Three hundred and eighty four undergraduate students (287 females) between the age of 18 and 34 ($M = 20$, $SD = 1.49$) were recruited to participate in this study. The study was conducted in the middle of the semester after the first exam period. Each participant filled out several personality measures and answered questions about three specific classes that they were taking that semester. The final data set included 1143 classes that were reported on by 381 students.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Personal standards perfectionism

In this study, to measure trait PSP, we used a short version of the High Personal Standards subscale from Frost et al.'s (1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (validated by Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002). The short version of the High Personal Standards subscale consisted of 5 items that measure the extent to which individuals set high goals and try to be best at everything they do ($\alpha = .85$). A sample item of this subscale is "I have extremely high goals". Participants responded to the items by indicating the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

3.2.2. Susceptibility to control

To measure individual differences in participants' general levels of controlled regulation around their behaviors, we used the Susceptibility to Control (StC) subscale from Weinstein, Przybylski, and Ryan's (2012) Autonomous Functioning Index. This measure captures the degree to which a person feels that he or she tends to behave in ways to please others or to avoid shame and guilt (e.g., "I do a lot of things to avoid feeling ashamed") ($\alpha = .75$). Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with 5 items from this subscale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

3.2.3. Class-specific measures

The participants were asked to list the 3 classes they were taking that semester in which they were working the hardest (compared to the other classes they were taking). If the participants were only taking 3 classes that semester, we asked them to list all 3 classes in the order of how hard they worked in each class. The reason for having the students focus their responses around the classes they worked hard in was to target the learning contexts where their PSP was most likely to be activated. After the participants listed the courses as asked, they were directed to the subsequent pages in which they were asked to answer a few questions about each course. Descriptions of those measures are detailed below.