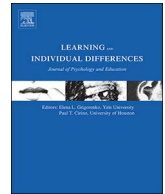




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Perfectionism, academic engagement, and procrastination among undergraduates: The moderating role of honors student status

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether honors student status moderated associations between perfectionism and both academic engagement and procrastination among undergraduate students ($N = 492$, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.83$ years). Results revealed that perfectionism predicted academic engagement and procrastination, beyond the effects of conscientiousness and neuroticism. Self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) was negatively associated with procrastination but was positively associated with academic engagement, whereas socially-prescribed perfectionism (SPP) was positively associated with procrastination but was negatively associated with academic engagement. Honors student status moderated the relations between perfectionism and academic engagement. Specifically, the positive association between SOP and academic engagement was stronger for non-honors students than for honors students. In addition, the negative association between SPP and academic engagement was significant for honors students but not for non-honors students. The findings suggest that perfectionistic tendencies play an important role in understanding academic engagement, especially among honors students.

1. Introduction

Perfectionism involves setting excessively high standards, striving for flawlessness, and critically evaluating one's behavior (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionism is commonly viewed as a multidimensional trait, with one dimension indicative of healthy or adaptive perfectionism and the other reflecting unhealthy or maladaptive perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic strivings, or self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), is often, but not always, considered to be a positive form of perfectionism that involves setting high standards for oneself and harshly evaluating one's own performance against these standards. In comparison, perfectionistic concerns, or socially-prescribed perfectionism (SPP), is a negative form of perfectionism, consisting of the fear of failure to meet the high expectations of others (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

The vast majority of research on perfectionism has focused on psychological wellbeing. Among college students in particular, previous studies have demonstrated positive links between perfectionism and maladjustment (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), such as depression and anxiety (Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, & Harvey, 2003). Some studies have begun to explore how perfectionism operates in an academic setting, focusing primarily on academic motivation (e.g., academic self-efficacy and achievement goals) (Bong, Hwang, Noh, & Kim, 2014) and academic performance (e.g., GPA) (see Stoeber, 2012 for a review). Comparatively

less is known about whether perfectionism is related to academic engagement, including students' feelings and behaviors regarding academic tasks (e.g., enjoyment, effort, and attention) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). According to Shim, Rubenstein, and Drapeau (2016), perfectionistic strivings should promote academic engagement; however, excessively high standards may promote procrastination. As academic engagement and procrastination have been identified as important predictors of academic performance (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002; Steel, 2007), the current study aimed to examine the links between perfectionism and both academic engagement and procrastination among undergraduate students. Given that perfectionistic tendencies may be especially characteristic of honors students (Parker & Adkins, 1995), we also explored differences between honors and non-honors students in the outcomes associated with perfectionism.

1.1. Perfectionism and procrastination

Procrastination is the voluntary delay of an action, despite intention to perform the action, and expectation of a negative consequence resulting from the delay (Steel, 2007). Procrastination is common among college students (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), with procrastinators earning lower grades than non-procrastinators (Steel, 2007). Solomon and Rothblum (1984) proposed that procrastination occurs

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due to a number of factors, such as fearing the consequences of success and anxiety regarding harsh judgment and evaluation. Perfectionism and procrastination are believed to be linked by an excessive fear of failure (Flett, Blankstein, Hewitt, & Koledin, 1992). Perfectionistic individuals may be fearful of scrutiny or comparison to peers and therefore prone to procrastination; by putting off a task, one cannot be evaluated and deemed incompetent or a failure. Previous research has indicated that individuals higher in SPP report more procrastination relative to those higher in SOP (Flett et al., 1992). Therefore, we expected to replicate this finding by demonstrating a positive association between SPP and procrastination and a negative association between SOP and procrastination.

1.2. Perfectionism and academic engagement

Students who are engaged in their academics pay attention, work hard, and enjoy academic tasks (Shim et al., 2016). Although little is known regarding the link between perfectionism and academic engagement, interest in engagement in the workplace and perfectionism has increased in recent years (e.g., Ozbilir, Day, & Catano, 2015). The limited research has indicated that perfectionistic strivings are consistently positively associated with work engagement, whereas perfectionistic concerns are negatively, but not consistently, associated with work engagement (Stoeber & Damian, 2016). In one of the few studies examining perfectionism and academic engagement, Zhang, Gan, and Cham (2007) found in a Chinese college student sample, that indicators of adaptive perfectionism (i.e., personal standards, organization) were positively associated with academic engagement; however, maladaptive perfectionism was largely not associated with academic engagement. Similarly, perfectionistic strivings predicted a longitudinal increase in academic engagement among middle and high school students (Damian, Stoeber, Negru-Subtirica, & Baban, 2017). Based on this research, we hypothesized that SOP, but not SPP, would be positively associated with academic engagement.

1.3. Conscientiousness and neuroticism as control variables

Among the Big Five personality traits, conscientiousness and neuroticism are especially relevant to understanding perfectionism (Stoeber, Otto, & Dalbert, 2009). Individuals high in conscientiousness are organized, persistent, and motivated in goal-directed behavior, whereas individuals high in neuroticism are emotionally unstable, experience psychological distress, and are prone to irrational ideas (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Many studies have shown that perfectionistic strivings are positively related to conscientiousness, yet a few other studies have also shown a positive link with neuroticism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). In contrast, perfectionistic concerns have been consistently positively related to neuroticism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Flett and Hewitt (2006) argued that healthy or adaptive perfectionism is not distinguishable from conscientiousness. Similarly, unhealthy or maladaptive perfectionism has been said to reflect neuroticism (Hamachek, 1978). Whether perfectionism uniquely contributes to predicting academic outcomes, beyond higher-order personality traits is not clear. Accordingly, it was important to control for conscientiousness and neuroticism in our examination of the relations between perfectionism and both procrastination and academic engagement to explore the potential unique effects of perfectionism.

1.4. Honors student status as a moderator

Previous research suggests that perfectionistic tendencies may be especially characteristic of high ability and high achieving students, such as undergraduate honors students (Parker & Adkins, 1995). Only two previous studies compared the incidence of perfectionism among undergraduate honors and non-honors students. Parker and Adkins (1995) found that perfectionistic tendencies, including both maladap-

tive (i.e., concern over mistakes, parental expectations) and adaptive perfectionism (i.e., personal standards) were greater among honors college students than non-honors college students. More recently, Wimberley and Stasio (2013) found that first year college students who were enrolled in an honors curriculum reported higher adaptive perfectionism (i.e., personal standards) than did non-honors students; however, honors students did not differ from non-honors students on maladaptive perfectionism (i.e., evaluative concerns). Aside from the incidence of perfectionism among honors students, it remains unknown whether honors and non-honors students differ in academically relevant outcomes associated with perfectionism compared to non-honors students. Therefore, a major aim of the present study was to explore the moderating role of honors student status in the links between perfectionism and both procrastination and academic engagement.

The extant literature on perfectionism among high achieving students has primarily focused on samples comprised exclusively of high achievers. As in the broader literature on perfectionism, studies focusing on perfectionism among high achievers have explored links between perfectionism and psychological adjustment and wellbeing. For example, in a sample of undergraduate honors students, Rice, Leever, Christopher, and Porter (2006) found that maladaptive perfectionism (i.e., perceived discrepancy in personal performance expectations and performance evaluations) was positively associated with perceived stress, depression, and hopelessness, and was negatively associated with social connection, whereas adaptive perfectionism (i.e., setting high standards for oneself) was positively associated with social connection and was negatively associated with hopelessness.

Compared to the clinical implications of perfectionism for high achievers, less is known about outcomes related to academic success that are associated with perfectionism for high achieving students. Rice et al. (2006) found that for undergraduate honors students, maladaptive perfectionism was negatively associated with academic integration (i.e., satisfaction with one's academic performance and general academic experience at their university), whereas adaptive perfectionism was positively associated with academic integration. Using a mixed-methods approach, Speirs Neumeister (2004b) examined achievement motivation and academic experiences among highly perfectionistic undergraduate honors students. Honors college students scoring high on SPP revealed in interviews that their fear of failure led them to develop high performance-avoidance goals (i.e., avoiding a feeling of incompetence relative to others), high performance-approach goals (i.e., achieving competence relative to others) and a tendency to procrastinate on their schoolwork. In comparison, honors college students scoring high on SOP reported that their need to achieve led them to develop high performance-approach goals, but also high mastery goals (i.e., developing competence in a skill), a desire to seek out challenges, and a strong work ethic. These qualitative findings suggest there may be a positive association between SPP and procrastination and a positive association between SOP and academic engagement among honors college students. Of interest in the present study was to explore whether these associations can be captured using quantitative methods and whether the strength of these associations differs between honors and non-honors students.

1.5. The present study

The purpose of the present study was to explore associations between two dimensions of perfectionism, perfectionistic strivings (SOP) and perfectionistic concerns (SPP), and two factors relevant to students' academic success, procrastination and academic engagement. Our first goal was to examine the extent to which perfectionism predicted procrastination and academic engagement, beyond the effects of conscientiousness and neuroticism. We hypothesized that SPP would be positively associated with procrastination. We also hypothesized that SOP would be negatively related to procrastination and positively related with academic engagement. Our second major goal was to

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