



A perfect blame: Conflict-promoting attributions mediate the association between perfectionism and forgiveness in romantic relationships



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ABSTRACT

The current research sought to explore underlying mechanisms that contribute to the relation observed between dyadic perfectionism and negative romantic relationship outcomes. Two studies were conducted to examine whether partner-oriented and partner prescribed perfectionists interpret a partners' behavior in a conflict-promoting manner, thus making them less willing to forgive their partner. Study 1 ($N = 137$) used hypothetical scenarios to explore how perfectionists expected they would respond to their partner's undesirable behavior, revealing partner-oriented perfectionism to be the prominent predictor of conflict-promoting attributions and willingness to forgive. Study 2 ($N = 185$) asked participants to write narratives about a past transgression in their relationship in which their partner was at fault. Findings indicated that both partner-oriented and partner prescribed perfectionism were associated with conflict-promoting attributions. Further analyses for both Studies 1 and 2 revealed that this maladaptive attribution style mediated the relation between perfectionism and forgiveness, such that perfectionists were more likely to make conflict-promoting attributions, thus leading to less forgiveness. Findings provide insight on how to foster forgiveness in couples where high expectations are either projected or perceived.

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1. Introduction

To date, the majority of perfectionism research has examined intrapersonal aspects of perfectionism. However, it is important to note that perfectionism is a construct that is not focused exclusively on the attainment of achievement goals, but rather a personality construct with identifiable interpersonal connections (Flett, Hewitt, Shapiro, & Rayman, 2001). Recent research has linked certain dimensions of perfectionism with negative outcomes for intimate relationships, including decreased marital quality (Haring, Hewitt, & Flett, 2003), increased dyadic conflict (Mackinnon et al., 2012), lower relationship satisfaction (Matte & Lafontaine, 2012; Stoeber, 2012), and lower commitment (Stoeber, 2012). The present study aims to understand why these negative outcomes occur, specifically by exploring how perfectionists interpret their partners' behavior and how they act toward their partners following a transgression.

Although research has indicated that perfectionism is associated with a negative attributional style for personal life events (Chang & Sanna, 2001; Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Pickering, 1998) and lower levels of trait forgiveness (Kim, Johnson, & Ripley, 2011), little research has examined how perfectionism might be linked with attributions of

others' behavior and how such attributions influence perfectionists' forgiving of actual transgressions. As forgiveness is considered to be a precursor to reconciliation and is associated with relationship satisfaction, commitment, inhibition of aggression, and trust for both the victim and the offender (McCullough et al., 1998; Merolla, Zhang, & Sun, 2012; Riek & Mania, 2012), it is important to explore why perfectionists have difficulty forgiving when experiencing dyadic conflict.

1.1. Dyadic perfectionism and judgment biases

Research has indicated that perfectionism can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that involves intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of perfectionism discusses three dimensions—self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP)—with the primary differences among the three components being the target to whom the perfectionistic behavior is directed and to whom the perfectionistic behavior is attributed. The present study is focused on the two interpersonal dimensions—OOP and SPP. Specifically, OOP is characterized by unrealistic standards for significant others, placing importance on other people being perfect, and harshly evaluating others' performance. SPP entails the perceived need to achieve standards and expectations placed by significant others and involves the belief or

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perception that significant others have unrealistic standards for them, evaluate them harshly, and put pressure on them to be perfect.

The current research focuses particularly on OOP and SPP specific to romantic relationships, as both dimensions involve close others and appear to be particularly detrimental to relationships. Research has found that those with high levels of OOP often place blame on others, are insensitive to others' feelings and needs, and harbor resentful feelings toward others (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Kim et al., 2011). Additionally, OOP is associated with a lack of trust and feelings of hostility toward others (Flett et al., 1998). Regarding SPP, research has suggested that SPP is linked with anger (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and, furthermore, this chronic sense of anger that stems from the perceived unfairness of others has a negative influence on relationships (Flett et al., 2001). SPP is also associated with irrational beliefs, such as blame proneness and anxious over-concern (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Koledin, 1991). Flett et al. (1991) explained that socially prescribed perfectionists blame not only themselves, but also others, for their own problems, partially because significant others are perceived as having prescribed expectations that are difficult to meet.

As perfectionists are more likely to have high expectations and react strongly to negative outcomes, it is important to examine the way in which they interpret and attribute the actions of others. Researchers have differentiated *causal* and *responsibility* attributions: Specifically, causal attributions refer to the source of the event, including the *locus* (internal vs. external), *stability*, and *globality* of the cause. Responsibility attributions concern to what degree the actor is accountable for the event, including *intentionality*, *motivation* (selfishness), and *blameworthiness* (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). In particular, responsibility attributions have been linked with anger and spouse-whining during problem-solving discussions (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992).

Broadly, distressed individuals are likely to make attributions for negative events that heighten their impact (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Specific to perfectionism, DiBartolo et al. (2007) found that those who have high perfectionistic tendencies are vulnerable to judgmental biases, in that they may expect negative events to be more likely to occur in the future and that negative social events are more likely to yield negative consequences. It is possible that perfectionism may have a broad influence on judgment-related cognitive processes, including attributions. As perfectionists are likely to experience distress in their relationships, they may be more prone to make conflict-promoting attributions, such as seeing the cause of a conflict to be stable or unchanging, influencing many areas of the relationship, or viewing the action as intentional and blameworthy. Research examining perfectionism and attributions of others' behavior is novel and can provide insight into perfectionists' reactions to negative occurrences.

1.2. Perfectionism and forgiveness through attribution

While there is no universal conceptualization of interpersonal forgiveness, the general consensus upholds that forgiveness involves willingness to transition from negative to positive thoughts, behaviors, and emotions (Klatt & Enright, 2011; Riek & Mania, 2012). Many studies have found that people's willingness to forgive an offender after a transgression can be explained by variables of a social-cognitive nature, such as judgments of responsibility and blame, perceived intentionality, avoidability, and severity (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; Merolla & Zhang, 2011). Fincham, Jackson, and Beach (2005) found that attributions that inferred negative intent, selfishness, and blameworthiness were negatively related to the ease of forgiveness in dating relationships. Further, high levels of negative attributions moderated the relation between the perceived severity of the transgression and ease of forgiveness, such that for individuals who made high levels of conflict-promoting attributions, perceived severity had a stronger impact on their (un)forgiveness.

According to Riek and Mania (2012), personality traits may impact forgiveness by creating a predisposition toward or away from a forgiving response. However, there has been no research linking perfectionism, attributions, and forgiveness together. Furthermore, there is little empirical research exploring both how perfectionists make attributions of others' behaviors and how perfectionists react to transgressions. Yet, recent work has explored the associations that link personality constructs similar to perfectionism with attributions and forgiveness. For instance, Ra, Cha, Hyun, and Bae (2013) found support that the relation between covert narcissism and forgiveness was mediated by causal and responsibility attributions. They suggested that covert narcissists are sensitive to negative events and tend to bear a grudge, which causes them to find it more difficult to forgive a transgressor. Covert narcissists tend to be hypersensitive to how others react to them, display vulnerability, and experience feelings of inferiority and worthlessness (Holdren, 2004; Ra et al., 2013). Perfectionism has some similarity with covert narcissism, in that perfectionists tend to be hypersensitive to criticism and have unobtainable expectations for their behavior and achievements. The association between perfectionism, specifically other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion, and narcissism has been empirically supported (Sherry, Gralnick, Hewitt, Sherry, & Flett, 2014; Stoeber, 2014). Kim et al. (2011) examined the relation between perfectionism and dispositional forgiveness and found that SPP was a significant inverse predictor of self-forgiveness and other-forgiveness, whereas OOP was not significantly associated with forgiveness. However, this study did not explore forgiveness in response to scenarios or actual transgressions, nor did it examine the underlying processes of perfectionism and forgiving.

Although there is little research on perfectionism and forgiving of specific events, there is evidence for a link between dyadic perfectionism and the use of conflictual coping strategies when dealing with relational transgressions. Haring et al. (2003) explored the use of conflictual coping strategies when dealing with marital problems, finding that husbands with high levels of SPP and wives with high levels of SPP and OOP exhibited an increased use of conflictual coping strategies. They also found that SPP negatively predicted marital adjustment and was associated with the use of conflictual strategies, such as nagging, demanding change, and blaming the partner. Flett et al. (2001) explained that this negative coping orientation is a reflection of a general sense of helplessness and hopelessness that is rooted in the socially prescribed perfectionists' belief that it is difficult to obtain approval from others because perfection is unattainable.

Providing similar support, Sherry, Sherry, et al. (2014) used a 14-day diary study of romantic couples to explore whether SPP predicted daily conflict, including daily hostile, critical, rejecting, and inconsiderate behaviors directed toward a romantic partner. Both self- and partner-reports of partner-specific SPP for males were associated with increases in self- and partner-reports of daily conflict. For females, only self-reports of partner-specific SPP predicted increases in partner-reports of daily conflict. Further, Sherry and colleagues discussed that males high in partner-specific SPP appeared to engage in self-defeating interpersonal behaviors, such that the perceived pressure to meet their partner's demands led them to engage in conflictual behavior. Conversely, females high in partner-specific SPP might respond to perceived pressure in non-conflictual ways, such as appearing perfect. Broadly, this research demonstrates that SPP has important negative implications for relationship functioning. However, the underlying intermediate process that connects perfectionism and relationship behaviors, such as forgiving, has not been rigorously examined.

1.3. The present research

In two studies, we investigated the relations between perfectionism, attributions, and forgiveness in order to better understand how perfectionism functions in interpersonal relationships. Based on our review of

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