



Perfectionism, personality, and future-directed thinking: Further insights from revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory



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ABSTRACT

In a recent study, Stoeber and Corr (2015) examined how three forms of perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, socially prescribed) predicted participants' affective experiences in the past two weeks, and found that revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (rRST) components explained the relations between perfectionism and affective experiences. As an extension, this study investigated whether rRST components—capturing individual differences in the Behavioral Approach System (BAS), Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS), Fight-Flight-Freeze System (FFFS), and defensive fight—also explained the relations between perfectionism and future-directed thinking. 343 university students completed measures of perfectionism, rRST, and positive and negative expectations for the next two weeks. Mediation analyses showed that all BAS components (reward interest, goal-drive persistence, reward reactivity, impulsivity) and the BIS, but not the FFFS and defensive fight, explained how the different forms of perfectionism predicted future-directed expectations. The findings suggest that the BAS and BIS components of rRST, which reflect fundamental emotion-motivational systems of personality, play a role not only in the relations of perfectionism and past affective experiences, but also in those of perfectionism and future-directed thinking.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory

The Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST) is a prominent neuropsychological theory of personality explaining individual differences in avoidance- and approach-related behaviors. It assumes the existence of three emotional-motivational systems: one approach system (the Behavioral Approach System [BAS]) and two avoidance systems (the Behavioral Inhibition System [BIS] and Fight-Flight-Freeze System [FFFS]). The most distinctive features of the two avoidance systems are emotional output and defensive direction: The BIS activates behavioral repertoire when moving *toward* threat, eliciting the emotional state of anxiety, whereas the FFFS activates behavior that moves the individual *away* from threat, eliciting the emotional state of fear. Further refinement and theoretical elaboration of RST resulted in a progressive revision of RST (Corr & McNaughton, 2008, 2012; McNaughton & Corr, 2004). Consequently, the latest measure of rRST—the Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory Personality Questionnaire (RST-PQ; Corr & Cooper,

in press)—captures individual differences in four components of the BAS (reward interest, goal-drive persistence, reward reactivity, impulsivity), BIS, FFFS, and a defensive fight factor.

1.2. Reinforcement sensitivity, perfectionism, and affective experiences

In a recent study, Stoeber and Corr (2015) demonstrated how rRST also provides new insights for our understanding of multidimensional perfectionism and the relationships that different forms of perfectionism show with affective experiences. In this study, perfectionism was conceptualized as a stable personality disposition, whereas the rRST components were conceptualized as representing neuropsychological mechanisms (or processes) underlying the relationships between perfectionism and affective experiences. A sample of university students completed the RST-PQ and a measure of multidimensional perfectionism differentiating three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Self-oriented perfectionists expect to be perfect, other-oriented perfectionists expect others to be perfect, and socially prescribed perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect (see also Hewitt & Flett, 2004).

Using multiple regressions, Stoeber and Corr (2015) found that the three forms of perfectionism showed unique relations with the rRST components. Self-oriented perfectionism showed positive relations with all goal- and reward-oriented BAS components (i.e., BAS reward interest, BAS goal-drive persistence, and BAS reward reactivity), but

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was unrelated to BAS impulsivity. In addition, self-oriented perfectionism showed positive relations with the BIS and FFFS. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism showed a negative relation with BIS and a positive relation with defensive fight, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism showed positive relations with the BIS and BAS impulsivity, and a negative relation with BAS goal-drive persistence. Further, mediation analyses found that the rRST components explained the relations that the three forms of perfectionism showed with affective experiences (i.e., how much positive and negative affect students had experienced over the past two weeks). Self-oriented perfectionism predicted more positive affect via BAS reward interest, goal-drive persistence, and reward reactivity, but had mixed effects on negative affect: On the one hand, it predicted less negative affect via BAS goal-drive persistence; on the other, it predicted more negative affect via the BIS. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism predicted less negative affect via the BIS, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism predicted more negative affect via the BIS and BAS goal-drive persistence.

1.3. Further questions

Stoeber and Corr's (2015) study made a novel contribution to the perfectionism literature because it was the first to explore the unique relations between rRST and multidimensional perfectionism controlling for the substantial overlap of the latter. Moreover, their findings suggest possible pathways from perfectionism, through BAS and BIS components, to experiences of positive and negative affect. In addition, the findings provide support for the theoretical rationale for Stoeber and Corr's linking of rRST and perfectionism theory: Different forms of perfectionism show different profiles of neuropsychological processes reflecting individual differences in emotional-motivational systems that predict avoidance- and approach-related tendencies and associated affect (see also Slade and Owens (1998) dual process model based on reinforcement theory).

Stoeber and Corr's (2015) study, however, also posed some further questions. First, some of the unique relations between perfectionism and the rRST components were unexpected or challenged previous findings and, therefore, need to be reexamined. As regards self-oriented perfectionism, the unique positive relation with the FFFS was unexpected. Whereas self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism have shown positive correlations with fear, socially prescribed perfectionism usually shows larger correlations (Hewitt & Flett, 2004). Hence, socially prescribed perfectionism should have shown a unique positive relation with the FFFS, not self-oriented perfectionism. As regards other-oriented perfectionism, the unique negative relation with the BIS challenges previous studies that found positive or nonsignificant bivariate correlations between other-oriented perfectionism and the BIS (see Stoeber & Corr, 2015, for details and references). Also the positive relation that other-oriented perfectionism showed with defensive fight was a potentially important new finding that would profit from replication. The same goes for the unique positive relation that socially prescribed perfectionism showed with BAS impulsivity.

Second, it could be argued that the BAS and BIS are primarily future-oriented systems, evolving around the expectations of reward and punishment. Consequently, rRST should be more critical in explaining individual differences in future-directed thinking than in past affective experiences. Future-directed thinking is closely linked to psychological adjustment and maladjustment. Positive expectations for the future are an indicator of hope and optimism whereas lack of positive expectations are an indicator of hopelessness, and negative expectations are an indicator of pessimism. Consequently, negative future-directed thinking (negative expectations, lack of positive expectations) is a vulnerability factor for stress, emotional disorder, and suicide ideation (MacLeod, Byrne, & Valentine, 1996; O'Connor, Connery, & Cheyne, 2000; O'Connor, O'Connor, O'Connor, Smallwood, & Miles, 2004). Therefore, it comes as a surprise that only few studies have investigated how self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism are

related to future-directed thinking, and unfortunately their findings are inconclusive. O'Connor et al. (2004), for example, found that self-oriented perfectionism showed a positive correlation with positive future thinking, whereas other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism showed positive correlations with negative future thinking. In contrast, O'Connor et al. (2007) found that other-oriented perfectionism showed a positive correlation with positive future thinking.

1.4. The present study

Against this background, the present study had three aims: (a) to replicate the unique relations that Stoeber and Corr (2015) found between rRST components and self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism; (b) to reinvestigate the unique relations previous research found between the three forms of perfectionism and future-directed thinking regarding positive and negative expectations (MacLeod et al., 1996); and (c) to provide a first investigation of the unique relations between rRST components and positive and negative expectations. As regards the first aim, we expected to replicate all unique relations except the unique positive relation between self-oriented perfectionism and the FFFS (see Sections 1.2 and 1.3). As regards the second aim, we expected self-oriented perfectionism to show a positive relation with positive expectations and socially prescribed perfectionism to show a positive relation with negative expectations, but did not have any expectations for other-oriented perfectionism (cf. O'Connor et al., 2004; O'Connor et al., 2007). As regards the third aim, we expected the goal- and reward-oriented BAS components to show positive relations with positive expectations and the BIS to show a positive relation with negative expectations. (Because the FFFS and defensive fight are systems that mainly react to present threat, not expectations of threat, we did not expect these components to be related to future-directed thinking.) Furthermore, expanding on Stoeber and Corr's (2015) findings, we expected BAS and BIS to mediate the relations of perfectionism and future-directed thinking.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

343 students (46 male, 295 female, 2 undeclared) at the University of Kent were recruited via the School of Psychology's Research Participation Scheme. Students volunteered to participate for extra course credit and completed all measures online using Qualtrics®. Mean age of students was 19.2 years ($SD = 3.3$), and students indicated their ethnicity as White (65.9%), Asian (14.6%), Black (9.3%), mixed race (7.6%), and other (2.6%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 2004) was used to measure self-oriented perfectionism (15 items; e.g., "I demand nothing less than perfection of myself"), other-oriented perfectionism (15 items; "If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly"), and socially prescribed perfectionism (15 items; "People expect nothing less than perfection from me"). The MPS has demonstrated reliability and validity in numerous studies (e.g., Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004). Items were presented with the MPS's standard instruction ("Listed below are a number of statements concerning personal characteristics and traits..."), and participants responded on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.2. Reinforcement sensitivity

The RST-PQ (Corr & Cooper, *in press*) was used to measure BAS reward interest (7 items; e.g., "I regularly try new activities just to see if I enjoy them"), BAS goal-drive persistence (7 items; "I am very

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