



The role of parents and teachers in changing adolescents' perfectionism: A short-term longitudinal study[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Although the important role of parents and teachers in the development of adolescent perfectionism is acknowledged, only few longitudinal studies have investigated this topic. Using a short-term longitudinal design with two waves spaced three months apart and a sample of adolescents, this study represents a first longitudinal investigation of parents and teachers as both risk and protective factors in perfectionism change. Results showed that perceived parental pressure predicted longitudinal increases in perfectionistic concerns and perceived anxious rearing predicted increases in socially prescribed perfectionism. Also, teacher support predicted longitudinal decreases in self-oriented perfectionism and in perfectionistic concerns. Implications of these findings for both research and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality characteristic that entails striving for flawlessness, setting exceedingly high standards, and making overly critical evaluations (Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt and Flett, 1991). Hewitt and Flett (1991) differentiate three facets of perfectionism that are both intrapersonal–self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., having perfectionistic expectations of oneself) and interpersonal–socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., having the perception that others have perfectionistic expectations of oneself that one must fulfill) and other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., having perfectionistic expectations of others). The latter facet, however, is largely disregarded in research with adolescents (cf. Flett et al., 2016). Frost et al. (1990) initially differentiated six facets, but, after further theoretical and empirical refinements (cf. Stöber, 1998), only three facets remained: personal standards (i.e., setting exceedingly high standards of performance) and concern over mistakes coupled with doubts about actions (i.e., perfectionistic concerns; over-preoccupation for not making mistakes and uncertainty about actions and beliefs). Factor analytic studies suggest that the different facets of the perfectionism models load on two higher-order dimensions: perfectionistic strivings (i.e., self-oriented perfectionism, personal standards) and perfectionistic concerns (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism, concerns over mistakes, doubts about actions) (cf. Stoeber and Otto, 2006).

1.1. Theoretical models of the development of perfectionism

To explain the development of perfectionism, several theoretical models have been proposed in the literature. All theoretical models agree that adolescence is a key period in perfectionism development and that parents play a pivotal role (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, and Macdonald, 2002; Stoeber, Edbrooke-Childs, and Damian, 2016). Also, it has been suggested that other social actors such as teachers may also play an important role through similar mechanisms and models.

The social expectations model proposes that perfectionism emerges as a consequence of contingent approval from parents expressed through perceived pressure to be perfect. Adolescents internalize parents' high expectations and the associated negative self-evaluation. Similarly, *the social reaction model* suggests that perfectionism can develop as a response to a harsh environment or to a lack of consistency on the parents' part. Thus, perfectionism develops to reduce further abuse, shame and humiliation, or as a way of establishing a sense of control. These two models show substantial overlap, the key common aspect being represented by pressure to be perfect – the degree to which parents set high performance standards and are overly critical of their performance (cf. Flett et al., 2002; Stoeber et al., 2016). Next, *the anxious rearing model* proposes that perfectionism may develop as an outcome of exposure to overly anxious parents who worry about being imperfect, making mistakes, and the negative consequences of those mistakes. Finally, *the social learning model* proposes that adolescents develop perfectionism through parental modeling (cf. Flett et al., 2002).

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However, there seems to be an overlap between the social learning model and all the other models, in that perfectionistic parents might promote perfectionism not only through modeling, but also through expressing pressuring, over-controlling behaviors (i.e., pressure to be perfect) and overprotective behaviors (i.e., anxious behaviors) towards their children (Appleton and Curran, 2016). Hence, it might be that parental perfectionism underlies most of the parental behaviors directed at adolescents that promote the development of perfectionism. Furthermore, parental perfectionism as personality characteristic is hard to modify. Therefore, identifying overt, specific behaviors directed towards adolescents may be more informative for perfectionism change in adolescents.

Summing up, the most characteristic behaviors directed at adolescents that promote the development of perfectionism are pressure to be perfect (perceived from parents and teachers) and anxious behaviors (perceived from parents).

1.2. The role of parents and teachers as risk factors in the development of perfectionism

Regarding the role of *perceived parental pressure* in the development of perfectionism, one longitudinal study found that perceived parental expectations predicted increases in socially prescribed perfectionism (Damian, Stoeber, Negru, and Băban, 2013) whereas another study found that perceived psychological control predicted increases in perfectionistic concerns (Soenens et al., 2008). Regarding *anxious rearing behaviors*, there is evidence to suggest that parental perfectionism and anxiety predict over-controlling behaviors (Affrunti and Woodruff-Borden, 2015), maternal anxiety is related with children's socially prescribed perfectionism (Cook and Kearney, 2014), and anxious rearing behaviors promote self-oriented perfectionism in clinically anxious children (Mitchell, Broeren, Newall, and Hudson, 2013). Moreover, it was found that perceived anxious rearing is cross-sectionally associated with socially prescribed perfectionism in university students (Flett, Sherry, and Hewitt, 2001).

Regarding *perceived teacher pressure*, a few cross-sectional studies were conducted with music teachers and coaches of adolescent musicians and athletes, respectively. One cross-sectional study found that perceived pressure from music teachers and from parents were related to the same degree with both dimensions of perfectionism in adolescent musicians (Stoeber and Eismann, 2007). The same relation was found in adolescent athletes with respect to perceived pressure from coaches and adolescent perfectionism (Dunn et al., 2006).

1.3. The role of parents and teachers as protective factors against the development of perfectionism

Theory and research focusing on the development of perfectionism emphasized risk factors that predict increases in adolescents' perfectionism. However, the same theoretical models and empirical research inform us about potential protective factors against the development of perfectionism. Thus, considering the opposite end of the social expectations and social reaction models, as well as of the social disconnection model (positing that a sense of social disconnectedness and perceived lack of social support are associated with high levels of perfectionism; cf. Sherry, Law, Hewitt, Flett, and Besser, 2008), one can hypothesize the opposite: high levels of support and a sense of connectedness perceived from parents and teachers would be related with decreases in adolescents' perfectionism.

Although important, there is little research investigating protective factors against the development of perfectionism so far. For example, high perceived parental support has been cross-sectionally associated with low socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic concerns in university students (Yoon and Lau, 2008). Conversely, low parental support have been cross-sectionally associated with high socially prescribed perfectionism in adolescents (Flett, Druckman, Hewitt, and

Wekerle, 2012). Similarly, a perceived supportive climate from coaches has been associated with low levels of perfectionistic concerns in adolescents (Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, and Miller, 2006).

Therefore, perceived parent support (i.e., the extent to which adolescents believe that their needs for support, information, and feedback are fulfilled by their parents; Procidano and Heller, 1983) and teacher support (the extent to which adolescents perceive that their teachers help, befriend, trust, and are interested in them as school students; Dorman, 2003) may function as protective factors against the development of perfectionism in adolescents.

1.4. Open questions and present study

Although progress has been made with respect to empirical support for the role parents and teachers play in changing adolescents' perfectionism, there are still gaps and open questions in the literature. Namely, regarding parental pressure, longitudinal research has focused either on Hewitt and Flett's (1991) or on Frost et al.'s (1990) model of perfectionism. Furthermore, socially prescribed perfectionism is an interpersonal facet whereas concern over mistakes and doubts about actions are an intrapersonal facet. Hence, we still do not know whether the different facets (interpersonal and intrapersonal) of perfectionism as conceptualized in these two models increase as a function of the same type of pressure. Moreover, there is no longitudinal research investigating the relation between anxious rearing, perceived teacher pressure, and parent and teacher support, on the one hand, and changes in adolescents' perfectionism, on the other hand.

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to investigate the role of perceived parental pressure, anxious rearing, teacher pressure, and parent and teacher support in predicting longitudinal change in adolescents' self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, personal standards, and perfectionistic concerns. In this, we used a short-term longitudinal design with two time points spaced three months apart.

Based on theoretical models and on previous findings, we expected: (a) perceived parental pressure to be perfect to predict increases only in socially prescribed perfectionism and in perfectionistic concerns; (b) perceived anxious rearing to predict increases in all facets of perfectionism; (c) perceived teacher pressure to be perfect to predict increases only in socially prescribed perfectionism and in perfectionistic concerns; and (d) parent and teacher support to predict decreases only in socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic concerns.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of adolescents aged 14–19 attending two high schools in Romania was recruited for a two-wave panel study. All classes from 9th to 12th grade were selected, to ensure an adequate sample size. The sample at Time 1 (T1) comprised 265 adolescents (216 male, 42 female, 7 no data). Mean age of adolescents was 17.3 years ($SD = 1.1$). From this sample, 170 adolescents (134 male, 32 female, 4 no data) also completed data collection at Time 2 (T2).

2.2. Procedure

Data collection for T1 took place at the beginning of the second semester of 2017, and for T2 three months later. This interval was considered sufficient because research has previously captured changes in perfectionism over periods between four weeks (e.g., McGrath et al., 2012) and four months (Damian, Stoeber, Negru-Subtirica, and Baban, 2017). Also, Dormann and Griffin (2015) suggested that optimal time intervals are usually shorter than what can be seen in the literature and that reliable changes can be observed over shorter periods of time. At both time points, adolescents completed the same paper-and-pencil

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