Personality and Individual Differences 123 (2018) 223–228

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Perfectionism and academic difficulties in graduate students: Testing incremental prediction and gender moderation

Megan E. Cowie[a], Logan J. Nealis[a,*], Simon B. Sherry[a], Paul L. Hewitt[b], Gordon L. Flett[c]

[a] Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Dalhousie University, Life Sciences Centre, 1355 Oxford Street, PO Box 15000, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 4R2, Canada
[b] Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, 2136 West Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z4, Canada
[c] Department of Psychology, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Perfectionism
Perfectionistic self-presentation
Graduate students
Academic stress
Imposter syndrome
Communication anxiety

ABSTRACT

Perfectionism involves impression management concerns, and yet perfectionistic-self presentation is often neglected when studying academic problems (e.g., communication anxiety). Research also focuses predominantly on undergraduate students, despite graduate degrees becoming increasingly common. This study tests incremental prediction of perfectionistic self-presentation on intrapersonal and interpersonal academic problems beyond trait perfectionism in graduate students. Participants (N = 269) completed self-report questionnaires of trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and academic difficulties (academic stress, imposter syndrome, and communication anxiety). A gender-balanced sample (52.4% women) allowed tests of gender moderation, which are often neglected in perfectionism research. Socially prescribed perfectionism uniquely predicted some, but not all, aspects of academic difficulties, and non-display of imperfection incrementally predicted all academic problems beyond trait perfectionism. Other-oriented perfectionism and perfectionistic self-promotion were negatively related to certain academic difficulties. Women showed greater imposter syndrome and academic stress, but results did not support gender moderation. Results support the unique importance of perfectionistic self-presentation in predicting academic problems in graduate students and highlight the need for continued research in this area.

1. Introduction

Research on perfectionism and academic performance in undergraduate students is common (Rice, Lopez, & Richardson, 2013; Stoeber, Haskew, & Scott, 2015; Verner-Filion and Gaudreau, 2010); however, high performance does not imply a lack of academic problems (Rice & Dellwo, 2002). Academic problems are also commonly investigated, including emotional adjustment (Verner-Filion & Gaudreau, 2010), procrastination (Rice, Richardson, & Clark, 2012), and evaluation anxiety (Stoeber, Feast, & Hayward, 2009). This research has yielded important findings regarding intrapersonal functioning; however, key elements of perfectionism are interpersonal (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 2003) and interpersonal features of academic problems remain largely overlooked.

Most research in this area uses undergraduate students, with graduate students being under-represented in the literature (for an exception, see Witcher, Alexander, Onwuebuzie, Collins, & Witcher, 2007). With many occupations now requiring post-graduate degrees for entry-level positions or career advancement (Torpey & Terrell, 2015), people are increasingly entering the workforce with graduate degrees. Because perfectionistic tendencies can contribute to burnout and workplace dysfunction (e.g., Childs & Stoeber, 2012; Flaxman, Ménard, Bond, & Kinman, 2012), it is important to understand how perfectionism manifests in graduate students to inform ways of helping these people prior to entering the workforce.

1.1. Multidimensional perfectionism and academic problems

Research frequently focuses on trait perfectionism—individual differences that remain relatively stable across time and situations. One such model of multidimensional perfectionism (e.g., Hewitt & Flett, 1991) includes self-oriented perfectionism (demanding unreasonably high standards for one's own performance), socially prescribed perfectionism (perceiving others as demanding perfection of the self), and other-oriented perfectionism (demanding unreasonably high standards for others' performance). However, theory and research (Hewitt et al., 2003) suggest perfectionism also manifests interpersonally through patterns of self-presentation, including perfectionistic self-promotion (engaging in behaviours to present an image of perfection to others), non-display of imperfection (concealing imperfection from others), and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: logan.nealis@dal.ca (L.J. Nealis).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.11.027
Received 18 July 2017; Received in revised form 11 November 2017; Accepted 15 November 2017

non-disclosure of imperfection (unwillingness to verbally disclose imperfections to others).

Perfectionistic self-presentation involves impression management in the service of appearing perfect to others, while being related to, but distinct from, trait perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2003). Perfectionistic self-presentation uniquely predicts academic outcomes (Hewitt et al., 2003; Nepon, Flett, & Hewitt, 2016), but research in this area is sparse and few outcomes have been tested (e.g., academic self-esteem and self-image goals related to academic outcomes). Another study tested perfectionistic self-presentation within a model of impression management and distress in university women (Schrick, Sharp, Zvonkovic, & Reifman, 2012), but did not test incremental prediction beyond trait perfectionism. While these studies represent promising advancements, the role of perfectionistic self-presentation in academic problems remains largely unaddressed.

1.2. Intrapersonal and interpersonal expression of academic problems

Research and theory suggest perfectionistic self-presentation plays a role in academic problems beyond trait perfectionism. Perfectionistic self-presentation is regarded as a general vulnerability factor for psychological distress (Hewitt et al., 2003) and has shown incremental prediction of emotional distress beyond trait perfectionism (Besser, Flett, & Hewitt, 2010). With a perceived pressure to perform and a need to prove one's competency, even minor tasks may take on an urgent quality and make people particularly vulnerable to day-to-day stress arising from academic demands.

Perfectionistic people use self-presentation to gain validation from others and avoid the criticism and rejection they fear (Flett, Besser, & Hewitt, 2014). Perfectionistic self-presentation may thus be relevant in the study of imposter syndrome—a phenomenon in which a person feels intellectually inferior despite demonstrated competence (Clance & Imes, 1978). Those who experience imposter syndrome hold high standards for their own performance and critically evaluate perceived failures (Hewitt et al., 2003; Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998). The desire to appear perfect to others and conceal flaws from others both independently predict greater feelings of fraudulence, perhaps demonstrating the need to maintain the appearance of perfection (Ferrari & Thompson, 2006).

People high in perfectionism may be similarly vulnerable to communication anxiety, which represents a fear of expected or actual oral communication with others (McCroskey, 1970). Research suggests both trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation are related to social anxiety (Mackinnon, Battista, Sherry, & Stewart, 2014) and doubts about social effectiveness (Besser et al., 2010). Given their desire for validation and fear of rejection (Flett et al., 2014), interpersonal communication may be perceived as a potentially high-stakes situation where successful impression management is at risk.

1.3. Gender effects in perfectionism and academic problems

Literature examining gender differences in perfectionism and academic difficulties is equivocal. Some studies show gender differences in trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation (Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, Lee-Baggley, & Hall, 2007) while others have not (Besser et al., 2010). Compared to men, women report greater academic stress (Rice, Ray, Davis, DeBlaere, & Ashby, 2015) and imposter syndrome (Henning, Ey, & Shaw, 1998; Jöstl, Bergsmann, Lüftenegger, Schober, & Spiel, 2012). With both perfectionism and gender seemingly impacting academic functioning, tests of gender moderation become increasingly important.

1.4. Objectives and hypotheses

We aimed to fill gaps in the literature by testing whether perfectionistic self-presentation incrementally predicts imposter syndrome, communication anxiety, and academic stress beyond trait perfectionism in a sample of graduate students. Socially prescribed perfectionism is a noted contributor to academic stress (Bardone-Cone, Brownstone, Higgins, Harney, and Fitzsimmons-Craft, 2012), social anxiety (Hewitt et al., 2003; Mackinnon et al., 2014), and imposter syndrome (Henning et al., 1998), while self-oriented perfectionism is frequently associated with positive academic adjustment (Kljajic, Gaudreau, & Franche, 2017). Other-oriented perfectionism often shows little relation to academic problems (Witcher et al., 2007); however, research suggests other-oriented perfectionism is associated with narcissistic traits (Stoeber, Sherry, & Nealis, 2015) that are seemingly incompatible with feelings of fraudulence. We hypothesized socially prescribed perfectionism would positively predict academic problems, self-oriented perfectionism would negatively predict academic problems, and other-oriented perfectionism would negatively predict imposter syndrome, specifically.

Second, we hypothesized perfectionistic self-presentation would incrementally predict outcomes beyond trait perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2003; Mackinnon et al., 2014). Only non-display of imperfection uniquely predicts social anxiety (Hewitt et al., 2003; Mackinnon et al., 2014) and general distress in students (Henning, et al., 1998). We expected similar relations with communication anxiety and academic stress. Consistent with research (Ferrari & Thompson, 2006), we hypothesized perfectionistic self-promotion and non-display of imperfection would predict imposter syndrome.

Moderating effects of gender are observed in research, but results are inconsistent (Hassan, Abd-El-Fattah, Abd-El-Maugoud, & Badary, 2012; Rice et al., 2013). Further tests of gender moderation are needed to help clarify this issue. Given inconsistent results, we considered these analyses exploratory and made no specific hypotheses regarding direction of effects.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Our sample included 269 graduate students (141 women; 128 men) from the University of British Columbia, with 72.5% in master programs (55.9% women), 19.0% in Ph.D. programs (47.1% women), 7.8% in other programs (e.g. MD, LLB, MBA; 28.6% women), and 0.7% not disclosing their program. Discipline of study varied widely across our sample, although most were in the area of arts and social sciences (43.1%), sciences (33.1%), and health professions (7.4%). Participants averaged 30.7 years of age (SD = 7.5) and 5.1 years of post-graduate study (SD = 2.5). Participants were mostly Caucasian (59.5%), Asian (15.2%), other ethnicities (12.6%), or not disclosed (12.6%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Trait perfectionism

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) consisted of three 15-item subscales including self-oriented perfectionism (e.g., “It makes me uneasy to see an error in my work”), socially prescribed perfectionism (e.g., “I find it difficult to meet others' expectations of me”), and other-oriented perfectionism (e.g., “Everything that others do must be of top-notch quality”). Each item was rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 7 (*agree*). Research supports the reliability and the validity of this scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan, & Mikail, 1991).

2.2.2. Perfectionistic self-presentation

The Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS; Hewitt et al., 2003) included three subscales: Perfectionistic self-promotion (10-items; e.g., “I always try to present a picture of perfection”), non-display of imperfection (10-items; e.g., “I will do almost anything to cover up a mistake”), and non-disclosure of imperfection (7-items; e.g., “I try