



# Ethnic variations in other-oriented perfectionism's associations with depression and suicide behaviour



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## ABSTRACT

At present, research generally supports the notion that other-oriented perfectionism (imposing perfectionistic demands onto others) bestows a protective function against personal psychological distress such as depression and suicidal behaviour. However, the vast majority of research on perfectionism and suicide has been focused on participants of European descent and surprisingly little is known about how other-oriented perfectionism affects psychological adjustment among participants of non-European heritage. The present research examined the associations between other-oriented perfectionism and psychological maladjustment including depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation and risk among undergraduate participants (120 European and 120 Asian Canadians). In summary, other-oriented perfectionism was negatively and uniquely associated with depression and suicidality only among European Canadians. Further, hierarchical regression analyses revealed that Asian Canadians with elevated other-oriented perfectionism reported the highest levels of suicidal ideation. The current study marks an important extension of research on other-oriented perfectionism and psychological distress through a cultural lens.

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## 1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a multidimensional construct that incorporates both intrapersonal and interpersonal trait and other components (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Trait perfectionism, as conceptualized by Hewitt and Flett (1991), consists of *self-oriented perfectionism* (SOP; i.e., a requirement for the self to be perfect), *other-oriented perfectionism* (OOP; i.e., a requirement for others to be perfect), and *socially prescribed perfectionism* (SPP; i.e., the perception that others require perfection of oneself). Socially prescribed perfectionism, in particular, has been identified as a risk and maintaining factor for a variety of psychopathologies, including depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and suicidal behaviour (see Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2011; Flett, Hewitt, & Heisel, 2014; O'Connor, 2007 for reviews). Self-oriented perfectionism, on the other hand, has been linked to depression, achievement stress, and suicidal behaviour (e.g., Blankstein, Lumley, & Crawford, 2007; Chen, 2012; Hewitt & Flett, 1993). Compared to self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, the relationship between other-oriented perfectionism and psychological adjustment has received much less empirical attention. The

overarching goal of the present study was hence to address important gaps in knowledge of the relationship between other-oriented perfectionism and psychological adjustment.

### 1.1. Multidimensional perfectionism and suicide

Empirical research has established the relationship between perfectionism and various indicators of suicidality. O'Connor's (2007) review of 29 empirical studies on perfectionism and suicide concluded that *socially prescribed perfectionism* by Hewitt and Flett (1991) and *concern over mistakes and doubts about actions* by Frost et al.'s (1990) were most consistently associated with measures of suicidal risk and behaviour. For instance, SPP was positively related to suicidal ideation, attempt, threat, and the overall suicidal risk in various clinical and nonclinical adult and adolescent samples (e.g., Blankstein et al., 2007; Dean, Range, & Goggin, 1996; Hewitt, Caelian, Chen, & Flett, 2014; Hewitt, Flett, & Weber, 1994; Hewitt, Newton, Flett, & Callander, 1997; Hewitt, Norton, Flett, Callander, & Cowan, 1998; Hunter & O'Connor, 2003). Furthermore, SPP uniquely predicted suicidal ideation even after statistically controlling for hopelessness and depression, both of which were strong predictors of suicide behaviour (e.g., Dean et al., 1996; Hewitt et al., 2014).

On the other hand, empirical evidence regarding SOP's association with suicidality is much less clear or consistent. While some studies

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found a positive association between SOP and suicide measures (e.g., Blankstein et al., 2007; Chen, 2012), others found no such significant associations (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2014). Chen (2012) found a significant interaction between SOP and achievement-related stressors in predicting suicidal ideation among 437 middle-aged and older community adults over a 6-month period. In other words, the vulnerabilities associated with SOP may only become evident in suicidal behaviour in the occurrence of ego-threatening life events, namely, achievement-related setbacks or failures (see Hewitt & Flett, 1993).

In comparison to SPP and SOP, little is known about the relationship between OOP and suicidality (for reviews, see Flett et al., 2014; O'Connor, 2007). O'Connor (2007) concluded there were “insufficient studies” to draw any firm conclusions about OOP's association with suicide (p. 709). Of the few studies that linked OOP to suicide, OOP was either negatively correlated (e.g., Blankstein et al., 2007; Hewitt et al., 1997; Hunter & O'Connor, 2003) or uncorrelated (e.g., Hewitt et al., 1994) with suicidal behaviour. Further, OOP was also positively correlated with positive future thinking and negatively with hopelessness and suicidal ideation in college samples (Blankstein et al., 2007; Hunter & O'Connor, 2003). Based on these findings, one may conclude that, by externalizing personal blame and distress, OOP serves as a buffer against psychological distress such as depression and suicide (see Blankstein et al., 2007; Hunter & O'Connor, 2003). The notion that OOP bestows a protective function is also in line with Baumeister's (1990) ‘escape from the self’ model, which suggests that attention or focus directed away from the self is associated with less devastating psychological consequences.

## 1.2. Multidimensional perfectionism and culture

A closer examination of the literature, however, revealed that much of the research on perfectionism over the past two decades has been based on the study of Caucasian or European American college students (see DiBartolo & Rendón, 2012 for a review). The lack of ethnic diversity in perfectionism research poses a serious limitation in our understanding of the nuances in perfectionism as it manifests in different cultural contexts. Moreover, the majority of published research on perfectionism and culture has relied on Frost et al.'s (1990) multidimensional perfectionism scale. For instance, compared to European American university students, Asian American students reported feeling more doubtful about their actions and being more concerned about mistakes, and experienced greater parental expectations and parental criticism (e.g., Castro & Rice, 2003; Chang, 1998). Furthermore, compared to European Americans, these maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism were more strongly associated with poorer academic performance, lower self-esteem, greater loneliness, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among Asian Americans (e.g., Castro & Rice, 2003; Chang, 1998, 2013). While the increased risk of Frost's maladaptive perfectionism and associated psychological distress among Asian Americans has been well-documented, surprisingly little is known about Hewitt and Flett's (1991) trait dimensions, particularly other-oriented perfectionism and its relations to psychological adjustment among ethnic minorities.

## 1.3. Other-oriented perfectionism and culture

We believe that a cultural angle is crucial for attaining a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between other-oriented perfectionism and psychological adjustment. Recently, a growing number of studies (e.g., Sherry, Gralnick, Hewitt, Sherry, & Flett, 2014; Stoeber, 2014, 2015; Stoeber, Sherry, & Nealis, 2015) reinvigorated research on OOP by demonstrating its unique associations with the so-called ‘dark personality traits’ including narcissistic and antisocial traits. Unlike SPP, OOP has been uniquely related to the grandiose as opposed to the vulnerable subtypes of narcissism (Stoeber et al., 2015). Furthermore, OOP has shown unique associations with higher social dominance,

interpersonal entitlement, exploitativeness, derogation of others, and lower agreeableness (e.g., Haring, Hewitt, & Flett, 2003; Sherry et al., 2014; Stoeber, 2014). Sherry et al. (2014) suggested that cultural context might play an important role in the manifestations of other-oriented perfectionism. More specifically, as narcissistic personality traits, OOP may be deemed less desirable or acceptable in collectivistic cultures that place greater value and importance on conformity and interpersonal harmony than more individualistic cultures (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Indeed, after controlling for the overlap with SOP and SPP, OOP showed positive relationships with the use of aggressive humor, uncaring and callous traits, a lack of prosocial orientation and empathy, as well as an individualistic orientation (see Stoeber, 2014, 2015). While other-oriented perfectionism has been shown to mitigate psychological distress such as depression and suicidality among college students of European descent (e.g., Blankstein et al., 2007; Hunter & O'Connor, 2003), it remains unclear whether OOP serves a similar function for people from more collectivistic cultural backgrounds (e.g., East Asian cultures).

## 1.4. Study goals and hypotheses

To summarize, the main purpose of the current study was to examine the relationships between multidimensional perfectionistic traits (SOP, SPP, and OOP) and measures of perceived pressure, depression, and suicidality separately for participants of European and East Asian descent. More specifically, consistent with prior findings (e.g., Blankstein et al., 2007; Hunter & O'Connor, 2003), elevated OOP among European participants was hypothesized to be negatively associated with depression, perceived pressure, and suicidality. Higher OOP was hypothesized to be either positively or nonsignificantly associated with depressive symptoms, perceived pressure, and suicidality among Asian Canadians. Furthermore, to control for the overlap with SOP and SPP, partial correlations were analyzed to evaluate OOP's unique associations with psychological distress separately for European and Asian Canadians. Finally, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to investigate whether OOP would interact with ethnicity in predicting concurrent suicidal behaviour.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 240 undergraduate students (153 women and 87 men) were recruited from a major Canadian university in exchange for extra course credits. Participants ranged in age between 17 and 29 ( $M = 18.90$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ). Half of our participants ( $n = 120$ ) identified themselves as East Asian in ethnic heritage (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, or Korean), while the remaining 50% were European Canadians. In terms of country of birth, 60.78% of our participants were born in Canada whereas the remaining 39.22% participants were born outside of Canada (e.g., Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam). Approximately 78% of participants of East Asian heritage were born outside of Canada. Overall, participants had spent an average of 12.78 years in Canada ( $SD = 6.26$ ), ranging from <1 year to 29 years of residency. The overall sample characteristics are representative of the university undergraduate population. The study obtained ethics approval from the university's behavioural research ethics board.

### 2.2. Measures

**Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991)** is a measure of trait perfectionism that consists of the following subscales: *self-oriented perfectionism* (e.g., “One of my goals is to be perfect in everything I do”), *other-oriented perfectionism* (e.g., “If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly”), and *socially prescribed perfectionism* (e.g., “Anything that I do that is less than

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