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The perfectionism social disconnection model: The mediating role of communication styles

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ABSTRACT

The perfectionism social disconnection model contends that perfectionism is negatively associated with social support. Researchers have investigated the mechanisms by which perfectionism may lower social support; however, no extant study has explored the role of communication styles. The purpose of this study was to explore whether communication styles mediate the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and perceived social support in a large sample of U.S. college students. Results found that maladaptive perfectionism had a negative direct effect on social support as well as a negative indirect effect through preciseness and verbal aggressiveness as well as a positive indirect effect through emotionality. This suggests that perfectionism may lower perceived social support through more aggressive and precise communication patterns but also may increase perceived social support through communication about negative emotions.

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a personality trait (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) that has been described as "a burden to most people who experience it" (Greenspon, 2000). Indeed, perfectionism is associated with many negative psychological, emotional, interpersonal, and social outcomes (Benson, 2003; Flett & Hewitt, 2002, 2005; Greenspon, 2000; Nounopoulos, Ashby, & Gilman, 2006) as well as physical and mental health complications (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Perfectionism is associated with lower social support (Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, & Caelian, 2006; Nounopoulos et al., 2006; Schuler, 2000; Ye, Rice, & Storch, 2008); however, extant research exploring possible mechanisms through which perfectionism may lower social support has not investigated the role of communication styles. The purpose of this study was, from the standpoint of the perfectionism social disconnection model, to investigate the role of communication styles in mediating the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and social support among U.S. college students.

2. Perfectionism

Perfectionism was conceptualized as a unidimensional construct until Hamachek (1978) theorized that there are two basic forms of perfectionism: a positive form labeled "adaptive perfectionism" and a negative form labeled "maladaptive perfectionism." Since then, a body of research has supported the notion that the construct of perfectionism is multidimensional in nature (Adkins & Parker, 1996; Blankstein & Dunkley, 2002; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Hill et al., 2004; Rhéaume et al., 2000; Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995; Stumpf & Parker, 2000). Although conceptualizations vary, most models of perfectionism contend that it consists of the two components: personal standards (expectations of high performance) and discrepancy (performance evaluations on one's self; Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). In this study, we were concerned with maladaptive perfectionism. Consistent with Richardson and Rice (2015), we operationalized maladaptive perfectionism as the discrepancy component because the purpose of this study was to explore how the perceptions of one's shortcomings impact the social support that individuals receive through different communication styles.

3. The perfectionism social disconnection model

Individuals who are high in perfectionism tend to perceive themselves as not being accepted, having no sense of belonging, and consistently failing to meet others' expectations (Hewitt et al., 2006; Stoeber, 2012). The feeling that others are dissatisfied with them and do not approve of them appears to have depressing consequences for individuals that are high in perfectionism (Sherry, Law, Hewitt, Flett, & Besser, 2008). The perfectionism social disconnection model (Hewitt et al., 2006) contends that the interpersonal dysfunction associated with perfectionism generates perceived social disconnection. In other words, individuals high in perfectionism tend to experience lower perceived social support. Furthermore, the perfectionism social disconnection model suggests that perfectionism produces a variety of interpersonal complications such as interpersonal over-sensitivity and hostility

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(Flett, Hewitt, Garshowitz, & Martin, 1997; Habke & Flynn, 2002; Nounopoulos et al., 2006; Schuler, 2000), which then result in a distinguishable, social disconnection, alienation, or a sense of not belonging (Hewitt et al., 2006). Additionally, perfectionistic beliefs are associated with interpersonal difficulties and depressive symptoms (Ye et al., 2008). Sherry et al. (2008) found that perceived social support mediated the relationship between socially prescribed perfectionism and depressive symptoms among university students. Collectively, these studies suggest a significant relationship between the trait dimensions of perfectionism and reduced levels of social support. According to the perfectionism social disconnection model, the resultant social disconnection is experienced as both subjective (i.e., a felt sense of detachment from others) and objective (i.e., actual severed or difficult relationships with others) social disconnection (Hewitt et al., 2006). Therefore, it is proposed that one mechanism by which perfectionism may lead to lessened social support is the interpersonal consequences that perfectionism creates, which, in turn, generates a sense of social disconnection and perceived lack of support.

3.1. Social support

Social support is defined as "the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value, and love us, and as the information that causes an individual to believe that he or she is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation" (Cobb, 1976; Nicolas, 2009; Sarason, Levine, Vasham, & Sarason, 1983). Social support is beneficial due to the assistance that one receives from family, friends, or acquaintances (Holt & Espelage, 2005). Social support is regarded as the both the perception and actuality that one is cared for and valued, all while having the availability of people on whom to rely. In the present study, we operationalized social support as perceived social support in which it refers to the belief that help *is available if needed* (Calvete & Connor-Smith, 2006; Nicolas, 2009). This was justified by the superiority that perceived social support has over received social support; perceived social support more consistently promotes psychological health and protects it during stressful times (Cassel, 1976; Cobb, 1976).

4. Communication styles

Although the topic of communication styles has received attention in management and business literature (Chan & Reich, 2007; Leonard, Graham, & Bonacum, 2004), there is little extant research on the topic in the psychological literature. Communication styles may be defined as "the characteristic way a person sends verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal signals in social interactions denoting: (a) who he or she is or wants to (appear to) be, (b) how he or she tends to relate to people with whom he or she interacts, and (c) in what way his or her messages should usually be interpreted." (De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, Alting Siberg, Van Gameren, & Vlug, 2009, p. 179). De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, Konings, and Schouten (2013) conceptualize communication styles as consisting of six domains: expressiveness (the verbal manifestation of extraversion), preciseness (the way individuals structure their communication), verbal aggressiveness, questioningness (to be philosophical, inquisitive, argumentative, or simply unconventional), emotionality (communication behaviors that exhibit being piqued, stressed, sentimental, sad, defensive, and bad-tempered), and impression manipulativeness (communication behaviors which may be used in order to obtain status or other rewards), each consisting of four subfacets. Examples of these subfacets and high loading adjectives and verbs on these dimensions are displayed in Table 3. No extant research has explored the relationship between perfectionism and communication styles. However, other research in the area of communication has found links between communication apprehension — which may be defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1997; McCroskey & Beatty, 1998) — and perfectionism; specifically, Shimotsu and Mottet (2009) found that adaptive perfectionism was negatively associated with communication apprehension and that maladaptive perfectionism was positively associated with communication apprehension.

4.1. The current study

Given that social interactions often contain ambiguities, personality traits (e.g., perfectionism) may influence social cognition (i.e., how individuals attend and interpret social information in their efforts to understand their social worlds). For example, when an individual is high in perfectionistic concerns (i.e., exaggerated concerns over the criticism and expectations of others, and nagging self-doubts), the dispositional attributions that he or she possess influences them to view others as hypercritical, demanding, and intolerant of mistakes (Dunkley, Sanislow, Grilo, & Mc.Glashan, 2006; Hewitt et al., 2006). This disposition may influence how perfectionists perceive and make meaning in society, thus influencing the way they interact with others (e.g., communication styles). The purpose of this study was to explore the perfectionism social disconnection model by investigating the role of communication styles in mediating the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and perceived social support among U.S. college students. Consistent with the perfectionism social disconnection model and previous research (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & MacDonald, 2002; Hewitt et al., 2011), we hypothesized that: (H_1) maladaptive perfectionism will have a negative direct effect on perceived social support. We also hypothesized that specific communication styles would mediate this relationship. Based on previous research showing links between perfectionism and negative emotion (Gilman, Ashby, Sverko, Florell, & Varjas, 2005; Parker, 1997; Rice & Slaney, 2002; Smith, Saklofske, Yan, & Sherry, 2015; Stoeber & Otto, 2006), we hypothesized that (H_2) maladaptive perfectionism would have a negative indirect effect on perceived social support through emotionality. Furthermore, perfectionism has also been linked with hostility (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Öngen, 2010); therefore, we hypothesized that (H_3) maladaptive perfectionism would have a negative indirect effect on perceived social support through verbal aggressiveness. Finally, previous research has shown that the constructs of perfectionism are closely associated with conscientiousness (Dunkley, Balnkstein, & Flett, 1997; Dunkley & Sanislow, 2004), therefore we hypothesized that (H_4) maladaptive perfectionism would have a negative indirect effect on perceived social support through preciseness.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Participants consisted of students ($N = 813$; 233 men, 580 women, $M_{age} = 20.56$ years) at a large public university in the South. Participants were recruited through the department research website. Participants' demographic information is displayed in Table 1.

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. Maladaptive perfectionism

The Almost Perfect Scale — Revised Short Form (APS-R; Slaney, Mobley, Trippi, Ashby, & Johnson, 1996; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) is a self-report measure of perfectionism. The APS-R is comprised of 23 items that measure the three facets of perfectionism: standards, discrepancy, and order. Given that previous studies have found that high discrepancy is the defining aspect of maladaptive perfectionism (Gilman et al., 2005; Stoeber, Harris, & Moon, 2007; Wang, Slaney, & Rice, 2007), this study operationalized maladaptive perfectionism as the discrepancy subscale of the APS-R. The discrepancy subscale consists of 12 items such as: "I often feel frustrated because I can't meet my goals" and "My best just never seems to be enough for me."