Preoccupied attachment, need to belong, shame, and interpersonal perfectionism: An investigation of the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model

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A B S T R A C T

According to the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model, interpersonal components of perfectionism (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation) develop when individuals exhibit an inordinate need for belongingness and shame as a result of early attachment insecurity and/or a lack of emotional attunement in the caregiver–child relationship. This study hence examined the mediating effects of the need to belong and shame on the relationships between insecure attachment and interpersonal perfectionism. A sample of 513 undergraduates completed self-report measures including trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, shame, the need for belongingness, and attachment styles. As hypothesized, socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation were both positively associated with the need to belong, shame, and insecure attachment styles. Furthermore, results from multiple mediation analyses indicated that the associations between preoccupied attachment and interpersonal components of perfectionism were mediated by a strong need for belongingness and shame. The present study hence provides further empirical support for the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model and highlights the importance of examining the quality of attachment relationships for individuals with elevated interpersonal perfectionism.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation

Perfectionism, as it has been established in its literature of the past two decades, is a multidimensional construct that incorporates both self-related and interpersonally-related components (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 2003). In addition to perfectionistic traits that drive various kinds of perfectionistic behavior (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), perfectionistic self-presentation styles involve the interpersonal expression of perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2003), and automatic perfectionistic cognitions reflect the intrapersonal expression of perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). Perfectionistic traits (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) consist of

self-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of oneself), other-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (perceiving others as demanding perfection of oneself). Whereas trait perfectionism encompasses the need to achieve perfection, perfectionistic self-presentation involves the drive to appear perfect by promoting a public image of perfection, concealing or not disclosing perceived flaws and imperfections. This form of impression management consists of three distinct facets (Hewitt et al., 2003): perfectionistic self-promotion (public promotion of one's supposedly perfect image), nondisplay of imperfection (avoidance of behavioral displays of one's perceived imperfection), and nondisclosure of imperfection (avoidance of verbal disclosures of imperfection).

Previous research has linked interpersonal components of perfectionism such as socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation with negative psychological outcomes including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, personality disorders, and suicide behavior (for a review, see Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2011). Furthermore, the importance of perfectionism in the interpersonal realm has been demonstrated by its associations

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with problems involving control, intimacy, negative rumination, emotional expressiveness, and assertiveness (e.g., Hewitt, Habke, Lee-Baggley, Sherry, & Flett, 2008; Mackinnon & Sherry, 2012). Despite a large body of evidence supporting the link between interpersonal perfectionism and psychological problems, the developmental process of interpersonal perfectionism has received relatively little empirical attention.

1.2. Attachment style, need to belong, and shame as possible antecedents to interpersonal perfectionism

Since early childhood, people develop internal 'working models' of the self and others based on early relationship experiences, from which they acquire affect-regulatory capacity and skills to create and establish positive, meaningful relationships throughout life (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The rupture or non-attunement in early attachment relationships has long-term negative consequences on one's personality development and socio-emotional functioning (Bowlby, 1980). Unlike securely attached individuals, individuals with insecure attachment have chronically unmet needs for acceptance and belongingness, as well as strong negative affective reactions to actual or imagined social exclusion or ostracism (for reviews, see Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Based on Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed four adult attachment styles based on four quadrants of positive versus negative models of self and others, including secure (positive self and positive others), preoccupied (negative self and positive others), fearful (negative self and negative others), and dismissing (positive self and negative others) styles. Whereas individuals with a positive other model (i.e., secure, preoccupied attachment) are motivated by a strong need for belongingness and therefore tend to approach others for intimacy and support, those with a negative other model (i.e., fearful, dismissing attachment) are less driven by a desire for belongingness and hence are more inclined to avoid emotional intimacy (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). *Preoccupied* individuals may have a particularly strong need to belong, to fit in, or to feel accepted (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney & Noller, 1990). Ironically, *preoccupied* individuals' hypervigilance to rejection and their maladaptive efforts to avoid conflicts or abandonment can create significant challenges forming and maintaining mutually supportive close relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Bowlby (1980) further suggested that early attachment relationships give rise to powerful, enduring emotions, such as shame. Shame is generally considered a negative, intense affective reaction following perceived rejections and losses and is often associated with global negative self-attributions (e.g., "I am an unlovable person for having done…," Lewis, 1971). Lewis (1971) suggested that the treatment of oneself by loved ones such as parental figures can become internalized standards that are used to evaluate the self. Shame, therefore, at least in part, is caused by perceived failures to meet others' expectations. *Preoccupied* individuals who have an inordinate need for belongingness are particularly susceptible to shame, partly due to the tendency to blame oneself for perceived failures and rejections (Cross & Hansen, 2000; Wei, Shaffer, Young, & Zakalik, 2005). In order to minimize the risk for rejection, people often modify their thoughts and attitudes, or learn to act or present themselves in ways in which they can obtain approval and acceptance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It has been theorized that individuals with an anxious or preoccupied attachment orientation may attempt to be or appear "perfect" or hide imperfections as a way of mitigating the sense of shame and enhancing a sense of

connectedness with others (Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

1.3. Perfectionism self disconnection model

Building on earlier theoretical and empirical work on early attachment and personality development (e.g., Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005; Bowlby, 1980; Horney, 1950; Mikulincer, 1995), Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, and Caelian (2006) developed and expanded (Hewitt et al., 2014) a model of perfectionism and psychopathology called the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model (PSDM). The PSDM postulates that perfectionism, particularly socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation, may originate from difficult or traumatic relational experiences with primary attachment figures (Hewitt et al., 2014). These early experiences may give rise to insecure attachment with others, and an overwhelming sense of shame, as well as powerful but unfulfilled needs for acceptance and approval (Banai et al., 2005; Hewitt et al., 2014; Horney, 1950). As described earlier, preoccupied individuals may be especially motivated to meet perfectionistic demands set by others or to present a perfect or flawless façade. Perfectionism, especially perfectionistic self-presentation, is therefore seen as a means to secure acceptance and caring from others and to avoid rejection, shame, and humiliation. Paradoxically, for these individuals, the very same behaviors that were engaged to enhance one's connection can often create further rejections and alienation (Hewitt et al., 2006, 2014).

1.4. Existing empirical research

Recent studies have found preliminary evidence supporting the PSDM. Chen and colleagues (2012) found that the significant association between fearful attachment and social disconnection was partially mediated by nondisclosure of imperfections in adolescents. Furthermore, Boone (2013) demonstrated that anxious attachment as assessed by the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) was positively associated with socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and binge eating behavior among adolescents, and perfectionistic self-promotion fully mediated the association between avoidant attachment and binge eating. Together, these findings indicate a strong relationship between attachment styles and perfectionistic self-presentation, at least among adolescents, and that perfectionism may result in the opposite of what it is intended to – alienation, distress, and a thwarted sense of belonging.

1.5. Goals and hypotheses

Despite preliminary evidence supporting the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model, the extant research does not address the mechanism by which insecure attachment may be associated with interpersonal components of perfectionism. For example, thwarted belongingness and a sense of shame that are central to the PSDM have received little empirical attention. Furthermore, previous studies (e.g., Boone, 2013; Chen et al., 2012) focused only on adolescents. Therefore, an important goal of the present study was to investigate the relationship between insecure attachment and perfectionism through their associations with the need to belong and shame in young adults.

In summary, we hypothesized that, first, socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation would be positively associated with insecure attachment styles, the need to belong, and a sense of shame. Secondly, in keeping with the PSDM