



Perfectionism and exam performance: The mediating effect of task-approach goals



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 August 2014
Received in revised form 10 October 2014
Accepted 11 October 2014

Keywords:

Perfectionism
3 × 2 achievement goals
Academic achievement
Exam performance
Multiple choice tests
Mediation analysis
Suppression

ABSTRACT

Perfectionistic strivings are positively correlated with students' achievement goals and exam performance. However, so far no study has employed a prospective design investigating whether achievement goals mediate the positive relationship between perfectionistic strivings and exam performance. In the present study, 100 university students completed a measure of self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and received a chapter from a textbook to study for 2–4 days. Then they returned to the lab to complete a measure of achievement goals following the 3 × 2 model (Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011) and sit a mock exam testing their knowledge of the chapter. Multiple regressions showed that socially prescribed perfectionism negatively predicted exam performance when the overlap with self-oriented perfectionism was controlled for. In contrast, self-oriented perfectionism—a defining indicator of perfectionistic strivings—positively predicted exam performance. Moreover, task-approach goals mediated the positive relationship between self-oriented perfectionism and exam performance. The findings suggest that perfectionistic strivings make students adopt task-approach goals that help them achieve better results on exams.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by overly critical evaluations of one's behavior (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). However, perfectionism has various aspects, and there are different dimensions of perfectionism with different characteristics. Consequently, perfectionism is best conceptualized as a multidimensional personality disposition (Enns & Cox, 2002).

Regarding multidimensional conceptions of perfectionism, one of the most influential and widely researched models is Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of perfectionism. Acknowledging that perfectionism has personal and social aspects, the model differentiates two main dimensions of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism.¹ Self-oriented perfectionism encompasses internally motivated beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important. Self-oriented perfectionists have

exceedingly high personal standards, strive for perfection, and expect to be perfect. In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism encompasses externally motivated beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important to others. Socially prescribed perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect and that they have to meet these expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004).

Factor analyses comparing various measures of multidimensional perfectionism found two superordinate factors underlying the different dimensions of perfectionism: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). In these analyses, self-oriented perfectionism always emerged as a defining indicator of perfectionistic strivings whereas socially prescribed perfectionism emerged as a defining indicator of perfectionistic concerns. Further research established that perfectionistic concerns consistently showed positive correlations with negative characteristics, processes, and outcomes (e.g., neuroticism, maladaptive coping, negative affect) indicating that perfectionistic concerns capture maladaptive aspects of perfectionism. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings often showed positive correlations with positive characteristics, processes, and outcomes (e.g., conscientiousness, adaptive coping, positive affect)—particularly when the overlap with perfectionistic concerns was controlled for (Hill, Huelsman, & Araujo, 2010)—suggesting that perfectionistic strivings capture adaptive aspects of perfectionism (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006, for a review).

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¹ The third dimension, other-oriented perfectionism, captures perfectionistic expectations directed at others and was therefore disregarded in the present study.

1.2. Perfectionism, academic achievement, and exam performance

The differentiation between perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns is also critical when regarding the relationships of perfectionism and academic achievement. The reason is that perfectionistic strivings show positive relationships with indicators of academic achievement such as grade point average and exam performance (see [Stoeber, 2012](#), for a review). In contrast, the relationships between perfectionistic concerns and academic performance are less clear. Most studies failed to find negative relationships between perfectionistic concerns and academic performance, except when discrepancy—that is, perfectionists' perceptions that they are failing to meet their high standards ([Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001](#))—was used as an indicator of perfectionistic concerns. Furthermore, [Flett, Blankstein, and Hewitt \(2009\)](#) found socially prescribed perfectionism to negatively predict students' performance in a classroom exam involving a multiple choice test. In contrast, self-oriented perfectionism showed the expected positive effect on exam performance.

1.3. Limitations of previous studies

There are, however, some open questions. First, the vast majority of studies investigating perfectionism and academic performance used cross-sectional correlational designs ([Stoeber, 2012](#)). This leaves open the question of the direction of the relationships because it is conceivable that higher academic achievement may not be an effect, but a precursor of perfectionistic strivings: Students who receive top marks may develop perfectionistic personal standards and expectations as a consequence of high academic achievement ([Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald, 2002](#)).

Second, no study so far has investigated what processes may be responsible for the perfectionism–achievement relationships. One possibility is that students' achievement goals are responsible, following findings from research on perfectionism and sport performance. Using a prospective correlational design, [Stoeber, Uphill, and Hotham \(2009\)](#) measured perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns one day before athletes competed in a race. In addition, they measured athletes' achievement goals for the race following the 2×2 model of achievement goals ([Elliot & McGregor, 2001](#)). The model has two dimensions: definition and valence. Definition captures the content of achievement goals differentiating performance and mastery. Valence captures the orientation of achievement goals differentiating approach and avoidance. Hence the 2×2 model distinguishes four goals: performance–approach (striving to do better than others), performance–avoidance (avoiding doing worse than others), mastery–approach (striving to master the task or to do better than one has done before), and mastery–avoidance goals (avoiding not being able to master the task or doing worse than one has done before). [Stoeber and colleagues \(2009\)](#) found that perfectionistic strivings predicted better race results. Moreover, the effect of perfectionistic strivings was mediated by athletes' achievement goals: Athletes high in perfectionistic strivings showed higher levels of performance–approach goals relative to performance–avoidance goals when compared to athletes low in perfectionistic strivings, and the difference between performance–approach and –avoidance goals mediated the positive effect of perfectionistic strivings on race performance.

1.4. The present study

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to provide a first investigation of how multidimensional perfectionism and achievement goals predict exam performance using a prospective design. In this, self-oriented perfectionism and socially

prescribed perfectionism served as indicators of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns ([Stoeber & Otto, 2006](#)), achievement goals were measured following the 3×2 model ([Elliot, Murayama, & Pekrun, 2011](#)), and exam performance was measured by having students sit a mock exam comprised of a multiple choice test (cf. [Flett et al., 2009](#)).

The reason why we followed the 3×2 model (instead of the 2×2 model used in previous research) was that the 3×2 model was developed in response to criticism that the 2×2 model did not differentiate between absolute and intrapersonal standards of comparison (e.g., striving to master the task versus striving to do better than one has done before). Consequently, the 3×2 model introduced a tripartite differentiation to the definition dimension capturing absolute (task), intrapersonal (self), and interpersonal (others) standards of comparison. Hence the model distinguishes six goals: task–approach (striving to master the task), task–avoidance (avoiding not being able to master the task), self–approach (striving to do better than one has done before), self–avoidance (avoiding to do worse than one has done before), other–approach (striving to do better than others), and other–avoidance goals (avoiding to do worse than others). Examining how the goals predicted students' classroom behavior and academic performance, [Elliot and colleagues \(2011\)](#) found preliminary evidence supporting the 3×2 model. Task–approach goals positively predicted intrinsic motivation and learning efficacy whereas self–approach goals predicted energy in class and other–approach goals predicted exam performance. In contrast, self–avoidance goals negatively predicted energy in class whereas other–avoidance goals negatively predicted learning efficacy and exam performance and positively predicted worry about exams. (Task–avoidance goals made no unique predictions.)

Based on previous research on perfectionism and academic performance ([Stoeber, 2012](#)), we expected self-oriented perfectionism to positively predict exam performance and socially prescribed perfectionism to either show no relationship with exam performance or negatively predict exam performance (cf. [Flett et al., 2009](#)). Regarding the 3×2 achievement goals, we expected other–approach goals to positively predict exam performance (cf. [Elliot et al., 2011](#)) in line with previous research on the 2×2 model suggesting that performance–approach goals predict academic achievement ([Moller & Elliot, 2006](#)). However, because our design included a learning component (participants had to learn a new text for the mock exam; see Section 2.3.2.), there was also the possibility that task–approach goals, which have been associated with learning efficacy ([Elliot et al., 2011](#); [Siu-Man & Leung, 2014](#)), would positively predict exam performance.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 100 undergraduate psychology students (11 male, 89 female) was recruited via the School of Psychology's research participation scheme (RPS). Mean age of students was 19.9 years ($SD = 2.7$). Students volunteered to participate in the study for extra course credit.

2.2. Design and procedure

The study followed a prospective correlational design with two measurement points: Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2). All measures were completed online using the School's secure Qualtrics® platform, except the mock exam which – to simulate an actual exam – was presented as a paper-and-pencil multiple choice test. At T1, participants followed the link from the RPS webpage to the

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