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# Psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem among adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists

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ABSTRACT

Using a tripartite model of perfectionism and positive psychology framework, the present study examined patterns of psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem across three groups: adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists. The participants were 200 college students in South Korea. Cluster analysis confirmed the existence of the three groups, mirroring findings from the previous literature. Adaptive perfectionists reported higher levels of environmental mastery and purpose in life of psychological well-being than nonperfectionists and maladaptive perfectionists. Adaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists showed higher life satisfaction and self-esteem than maladaptive perfectionists; however, no significant differences between adaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists were found on these variables. Implications of the findings and directions for future research are discussed.



## 1. Introduction

For the past 25 years, the construct of perfectionism has been an important topic of empirical research in psychology. Although an exact definition of perfectionism is still under debate (cf. Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002), theorists and researchers seem to reach consensus on the core characteristics of perfectionism: the pursuit of a state of flawlessness and the setting of high standards for oneself and one's performance (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). The nature and structure of perfectionism have been conceptualized in various ways. Particularly, a distinction between maladaptive versus adaptive forms of perfectionism[1] has received much attention from researchers and has been studied extensively. This can be traced back to Hamachek's (1978) early discussion of the differentiation between normal perfectionists and neurotic perfectionists. As a result, a significant body of empirical evidence has accumulated supporting the notion that perfectionism can be not only negative and pathological, but also positive and adaptive (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Two major approaches have been adopted to identify these two forms of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). A *dimensional* approach attempts to differentiate adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism. Within this framework, two higher-order, independent factors reflecting adaptive and maladaptive aspects of perfectionism are derived based on different combinations of perfectionism measures (Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, & Winkworth, 2000; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). On the other hand, a *group-based* approach classifies individuals into three groups of adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists, also referred to as the tripartite model of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Several studies, using cluster analysis as the main analytical tool, supported the existence of these three groups (Grzegorek et al., 2004; Lee & Park, 2011; Mobley, Slaney, & Rice, 2005; Rice & Slaney, 2002).

The characteristics of adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists have been explored by their mean differences on measures of positive and negative mental

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[1] It should be noted that several different terms have been used to describe both adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006). For example, adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists (Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze, & Rice, 2004; Rice & Slaney, 2002), healthy and unhealthy perfectionists (Parker, 1997), functional and dysfunctional perfectionists (Rhéaume et al., 2000) have been used to indicate different groups of perfectionists, and more diverse labels were used for adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism. We use the adjectives *adaptive* and *maladaptive*, because they are the most commonly used terms within the literature.

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health functioning. Poor psychological health of maladaptive perfectionists as well as the absence of illness of adaptive perfectionists has been consistently supported by maladaptive perfectionists' significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety than adaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists (Grzegorek et al., 2004; Mobley et al., 2005; Ortega, Wang, Slaney, Hayes, & Morales, 2014; Rice & Slaney, 2002). However, evidence for the presence of positive psychological functioning of adaptive perfectionists remains unclear and limited in scope. Mental health can be defined by not only the absence of illness but also the presence of positive psychological functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon & King, 2001). Stoeber and Otto (2006), in their review paper, also claim that "the critical question is whether healthy perfectionists show higher levels of positive characteristics than unhealthy perfectionists" (p. 311). Thus, in the present study, we seek to examine which positive characteristics or strengths are possessed by adaptive perfectionists in comparison to nonperfectionists and maladaptive perfectionists.

Prior research has focused on adaptive perfectionists' self-esteem and academic variables [e.g., grade point average (GPA) scores] as indices of positive functioning, yet findings have yielded mixed results. For example, compared to nonperfectionists and maladaptive perfectionists, adaptive perfectionists were reported to have higher levels of self-esteem (Grzegorek et al., 2004; Mobley et al., 2005; Rice & Slaney, 2002), but in some studies, adaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists had similar levels of self-esteem (Lee & Park, 2011; Ortega et al., 2014). Many studies failed to find significant differences in the self-reported GPA across the three groups (Grzegorek et al., 2004; Mobley et al., 2005; Rice & Slaney, 2002). However, more recently, studies have found that adaptive perfectionists' GPA scores were higher than those of nonperfectionists and maladaptive perfectionists (Rice & Ashby, 2007; Rice, Lopez, & Richardson, 2013). The findings on GPA satisfaction are also inconsistent in that Grzegorek et al. (2004) found that adaptive perfectionists showed greater satisfaction with their GPA than the other two groups, whereas no differences in GPA satisfaction were reported across the three groups in Mobley et al.'s study (2005). In essence, further investigation of positive functioning of adaptive perfectionists is needed not only to clarify the inconsistent findings in prior research, but also to expand the scope of indices used to measure positive psychological functioning beyond self-esteem and academic variables.

Many researchers have called for the need to examine the relation between perfectionism and positive psychological functioning (Chang, 2006; Gilman, Ashby, Sverko, Florell, & Varjas, 2005). Psychological well-being, originally proposed by Ryff (1989), is grounded in systematic reviews and integration of various theories and conceptualizations of happiness and well-being. The construct of psychological well-being is multidimensional and encompasses the following six dimensions: Self-Acceptance, Positive Relations with Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth. Psychological well-being has been linked to a wide range of mental health variables such as mood and anxiety disorders and self-esteem (Ryff, 2014). Yet, little research has examined the relationship between perfectionism and dimensions of psychological well-being. Chang (2006) found that self-oriented perfectionism of the Hewitt and Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HF-MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) was positively related with Purpose in Life and Personal Growth, and socially prescribed perfectionism of HF-MPS was negatively associated with all the six dimensions of psychological well-being. Building on this, the current study aims to examine how multiple aspects of psychological well-being are manifested in different groups of perfectionists.

Life satisfaction, a cognitive assessment of individuals' quality of life, is an essential component of subjective well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and has been presented as an indicator of positive psychological functioning (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). There is empirical evidence that suggests positive associations between life satisfaction and adaptive forms of perfectionism (Chang, 2000; Chang, Watkins, & Banks, 2004; Gilman et al., 2005; Rice & Ashby, 2007). For example, Gilman et al. (2005) found that in both American and Croatian adolescents, adaptive perfectionists had higher levels of satisfaction across several life domains than maladaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists. Rice and Ashby's study (2007) also yielded similar findings with a measure of global life satisfaction. In this study, we aimed to examine whether the positive relations between life satisfaction and adaptive forms of perfectionism would hold for a sample of South Korean college students.

Taken together, the aim of the current study is to take a closer look at positive psychological functioning of adaptive perfectionists and to examine specifically what positive characteristics they possess in a South Korean college student sample. To assess positive psychological functioning, we measured dimensions of psychological well-being and life satisfaction, with the frequently studied variable of self-esteem. Depression was used as the indicator of negative psychological functioning in this study. Using cluster analysis, we first tested whether two groups of perfectionists and nonperfectionists are replicated in this sample of South Korean college students. Then, the between-group differences in psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem were examined.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 200 college students who were recruited from two introductory psychology classes in a large private university in Seoul, South Korea. About half of the participants were males ($n$ = 114, 57%), and the participants' mean age was 20.30 years ($SD$ = 2.08). After receiving permission from the classes' instructors, students were asked to participate in a research study and complete survey packets during class time. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and their responses would be kept confidential.

### 2.2. Instruments

#### 2.2.1. Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (F-MPS: Frost et al., 1990)

The 35-item F-MPS assesses individuals' levels of perfectionism. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale from "1 = *strongly disagree*" to "5 = *strongly agree*." The F-MPS consists of six subscales: Concern over Mistakes (CM), Personal Standards (PS), Parental Expectations (PE), Parental Criticism (PC), Doubts about Actions (DA), and Organization (O). Several studies provided evidence of acceptable reliability and validity estimates of the scale (Enns & Cox, 2002; Frost et al., 1990). A translated version by Lee and Park (2011) was used. In this study, the Cronbach alphas for the subscales of F-MPS were .81 (CM), .71 (PS), .81 (PE), .77 (PC), .71 (DA), and .83 (O).

#### 2.2.2. Scales of Psychological Well-Being (SPWB; Ryff, 1989)

The SPWB is designed to measure the construct of psychological well-being and consists of the following six dimensions: Self-Acceptance, Positive Relations with Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth. Several versions of SPWB exist, ranging from a shortened scale (three items per dimension; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) to the original 120-item scale (20 items per dimension; Ryff, 1989). Ryff, Lee, and Na (1993)