



## Exploring family origins of perfectionism: The impact of interparental conflict and parenting behaviors☆



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### ABSTRACT

The present study explored family origins of perfectionism among 382 college students aged 18–25 with an online survey (81.2% females, 89.3% Caucasians). We examined parental psychological control and autonomy support as a mechanism between interparental conflict and perfectionism dimensions. With structural equation modeling, results showed that psychological control was associated with personal standard, concern over mistakes and doubts about action, whereas autonomy support was associated with personal standard and organization. Interparental conflict had a direct effect on doubts about action when parenting was considered. In addition, interparental conflict had indirect effects on personal standard through psychological control and autonomy support, and on concern over mistakes and doubts about action through psychological control. The findings of the study identified interparental conflict as an important contributor to the development of perfectionism, and parenting behaviors as explanatory processes of the formation. Implications of the study and future directions of research were discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Perfectionism refers to individuals setting extremely high standards for themselves and developing unreasonable fear for making mistakes (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Historically, perfectionism has been linked with psychopathology (Frost et al., 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006) and viewed as a unidimensional construct. Recent studies, however, have identified perfectionism as a construct composed of various dimensions that can be categorized into two types: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic strivings involve individuals' tendencies to strive for the best and intolerance of not meeting high standards, whereas perfectionistic concerns relate to excessive worries of making mistakes, and hypersensitivity to others' judgment (Fletcher, Shim, & Wang, 2012). In a review study, Stoeber and Otto (2006) found that perfectionistic strivings were associated with positive characteristics, whereas perfectionistic concerns were related to negative ones. They suggested that researchers examine each type of perfectionism to distinguish between “healthy pursuit of excellence” (p. 15) and neurotic perfectionism concerns.

In the past two decades, research has demonstrated the link between perfectionism and maladaptive outcomes among children and adolescents. However, studies about the origins of perfectionism have been rather limited (Gnilka & Noble, 2011; Hibbard & Walton, 2014). The development of perfectionism is believed to originate from families, as evidenced by measures of perfectionism that assess family environment, and aspects of parenting in particular (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The social reaction model discussed how children developed perfectionism to cope with a harsh and stressful family environment to regain a sense of internal control (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & MacDonald, 2002). Accumulated empirical evidence has shown the association between ineffective parenting and perfectionism (Craddock, Church, & Sands, 2009; Fletcher et al., 2012; Gong, Fletcher, & Bolin, 2015).

On the other hand, the association between parenting and interparental conflict has been established in the literature. Interparental conflict was related to various forms of ineffective parenting among preschoolers, middle childhood children, and adolescents (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Cummings & Davies, 2010). According to the spillover hypothesis, negative effects generated from conflicts between spouses “spill over” to the parent–child realm changing the ways parents discipline and interact with their children (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001).

The current study explored the contextual impact of family on the development of late adolescents' perfectionism. In response to the social reaction model (Flett et al., 2002), we examined both parenting behaviors and stressful family emotional environment as indicated by interparental

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conflict as possible contributors of perfectionism. The spillover hypothesis was tested, and given the empirical link between interparental conflict and parenting, and between parenting and perfectionism, we examined whether parenting functioned as mediator between the relations of interparental conflict and perfectionism dimensions.

### 1.1. Family as a context for perfectionism development

Family system theory proposes that rather than examining how children develop solely in parent–child realm, researchers need to consider the influence of other family systems (e.g., interactions between parents, child–siblings) (Cox & Paley, 2003). It is therefore important to go beyond parent–child system, and examine the broader family contexts to explore the origins of perfectionism.

Flett et al. (2002) proposed a comprehensive model to explain how perfectionism develops in families. Notably, in their social reaction model, they argued that children who are exposed to a harsh environment and experience psychological distress may develop perfectionism as a coping system to deal with a chaotic environment, to escape from humiliation and pain, and to regain a sense of worth and control. Such a harsh environment includes a chaotic family emotional environment, and/or intrusive, harsh, or inconsistent parenting (Flett et al., 2002). The literature supported the model by demonstrating the link between ineffective parenting and perfectionism (Speirs Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2009). However, there is a dearth of research examining how an overall family emotional environment relates to perfectionism.

Craddock et al.'s (2009) study was one of the few that examined family system characteristics and parenting as predictors of perfectionism. They found that in addition to parenting, relations between family members, family enmeshment, and chaos also predicted perfectionism. Despite the limitations of the study (e.g., using multiple parenting measures that overlap with each other, unclear distinction between the family characteristics measures), it demonstrated some preliminary evidence for the importance of relational contexts within families on individuals' development of perfectionism.

### 1.2. Parenting and perfectionism

Assessments of perfectionism directly include relational family contexts among origins of perfectionism. Two of the most commonly used perfectionism scales included measurements of expectations and criticism from parents (see Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). For example, two of Frost et al.'s (1990) multidimensional perfectionism subscales assess parental expectations and criticism towards children. The Hewitt and Flett (1991) socially prescribed subscale measures significant family members' (mostly parents') unrealistic high expectations towards children.

Of the rather limited empirical findings regarding origins of perfectionism, existing evidence showed that authoritarian parenting, characterized by rigid demandingness and low emotional responsiveness, was associated with perfectionism, especially perfectionistic concerns (Frost et al., 1993; Miller, Lambert, & Speirs Neumeister, 2012; Speirs Neumeister & Finch, 2006). Parental psychological control—destructive parenting practices that use covert psychological intrusive skills (verbal or nonverbal) to manipulate their children's emotion and behavior—was also related to perfectionistic concerns (Craddock et al., 2009; Fletcher et al., 2012; Soenens et al., 2008). Interestingly, adaptive forms of parenting such as authoritative parenting, defined as parental encouragement of autonomy and provision of emotional support, was associated with perfectionistic strivings (Gong et al., 2015). Similar patterns of relations have been found in non-western cultures. For example, in a recent study by Shih (2013), teachers' autonomy support predicted Taiwanese eighth graders' perfectionistic strivings, and parental psychological control predicted perfectionistic concerns when children's report of teachers' and parents' autonomy support and psychological control were included. Flett et al. (2002) highlighted two parenting dimensions

in the development of perfectionism: parental control and parental harshness (lack of support/autonomy). In response to the theoretical proposition, we included both parenting dimensions in the study.

### 1.3. Interparental conflict and parenting

Decades of research have well documented the link between interparental conflict and parenting. Interparental conflict has been associated with low maternal and paternal warmth (Fosco & Grych, 2013), maternal sensitivity (Manning, Davies, & Cicchetti, 2014), harsh discipline (Dehon & Weems, 2010), and high level of parental psychological control (Li, Putallaz, & Su, 2011). In a national study on families, relations between marital conflict, ineffective parenting (defined as harsh discipline, low parental involvement), and children and adolescents' maladjustment were examined. Spillover effects were found among preschoolers, middle childhood children, and adolescents. Marital conflict was associated with negative parenting, which in turn led to children's and adolescents' maladjustment (Buehler & Gerard, 2002).

Research methods in many studies have been robust, adopting a longitudinal design and collecting data from diverse samples with multi-method, multi-informant approach. For example, Fosco and Grych (2013) found indirect effects of interparental conflict on children's emotion regulation through parental warmth and sensitivity using lab observation and questionnaires completed by both parents and children. In a recent longitudinal multi-method study with high-risk samples for domestic violence, sensitive parenting was found to serve as a protective factor for the impact of interparental violence on young children's maladaptive outcomes and psychological adjustment (Manning et al., 2014).

Quite noticeably, despite the robust design, most studies have focused on experiences of children with fewer studies examining adolescents and beyond. One of the objectives of the current study was to test the spillover effect during late adolescence, a period when family socialization becomes more voluntary as most have moved out of their parents' house for educational or independent purposes (Arnett, 2007). During this period, family influences, whether parenting behaviors, or an overall family emotional environment, exert influence on late adolescents in more flexible ways (Arnett, 2007). For example, they are granted greater autonomy and less likely to be psychologically controlled. Moreover, despite the relatively increased physical distance between parents and late adolescents, disturbances from interparental relationship and problematic parenting behaviors may still foster the development of perfectionism. Exploring the development of perfectionism in family contexts for this particular age group may help address the literature gap, and enrich our understanding of the origins of perfectionism.

### 1.4. The present study

Based on the review of the literature, we included parenting behaviors and interparental conflict as possible predictors of late adolescents' perfectionism. In particular, both direct and indirect effects (via parenting) of interparental conflict on perfectionism dimensions were examined. We hypothesized that first, interparental conflict was associated with heightened psychological control, and less autonomy support; second, psychological control predicted concern over mistakes and doubts about action, whereas autonomy support predicted personal standard and organization; and finally, interparental conflict had both direct and indirect effects on late adolescents' perfectionism dimensions.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 382 undergraduates from a wide range of majors (81.2% female) recruited from a research pool at a Midwestern university.

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