



## Groups of perfectionists, test anxiety, and pre-exam coping in Argentine students



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### ABSTRACT

We addressed Gaudreau's claim (2012) relating to scrutiny the  $2 \times 2$  model with narrow measures of perfectionism. Accordingly, we tested the model not only with another specific measure of perfectionism (the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) but also with a group-based approach, and with specific outcome measures in an Argentine sample of university students. 277 participants completed measures of perfectionism, test anxiety, and pre-exam coping. We concluded that our evidence does not support the purely self-critical subtype as more pathological than the other subtypes. Regarding correlational results, test anxiety was strongly linked to the negative dimension of perfectionism (discrepancy), while problem-orientation coping seemed to be associated with the positive dimension of perfectionism (high standards). From a group-based approach, maladaptive perfectionists tended to suffer more test anxiety than adaptive perfectionists, whereas this latter group did not do better than non-perfectionists. With respect to pre-exam coping, perfectionists were prone to select more problem-oriented strategies regardless of their levels of discrepancy. Finally, although this study was not focused on cross-cultural differences, findings on Latin Americans students could serve as a starting point to promote new research in this field.

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### 1. Introduction

Despite the fact that several measures of perfectionism have been developed from distinct theoretical bases (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Rice & Slaney, 2002), researchers agree that this construct has two core aspects. The positive dimension of perfectionism comprises the possession of high standards while the negative dimension of perfectionism involves an excessive concern about falling short of these standards (Rice & Slaney, 2002). Thus, perfectionism can be understood as a personality trait characterized by an interaction between these positive and negative features.

#### 1.1. Correlational and group-based approaches

From a methodological perspective, there are two major approaches in studying perfectionism. The correlational approach seeks to find whether perfectionism is related to psychological constructs across people. Consistent with this, results of early studies have provided support for the link between evaluative concerns and negative psychological outcomes (Shafran & Mansell, 2001). The positive dimension of perfectionism, in turn, has received mixed results from research (Stoeber &

Otto, 2006). On the other hand, the person-oriented or group-based approach seeks to ascertain individual differences on dimensions of perfectionism (Lundh, Saboonchi, & Wangby, 2008). Group-based studies have consistently supported the notion that two subtypes of perfectionism can be empirically identified. In brief, maladaptive perfectionists (MP) refer to individuals who hold high standards but feel like failures if their goals are not perfectly met. Conversely, those individuals who hold high standards but have a flexible assessment of their achievements tend to be considered adaptive perfectionists (AP) (Rice & Ashby, 2007). Finally, non-perfectionists (NP) remain as a residual subtype for people who report low standards. As a logical complement, research on subtypes of perfectionism has mirrored most findings of correlational approaches on measures of both psychological distress and well-being (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

#### 1.2. The $2 \times 2$ model and the purely self-critical subtype

As Smith, Saklofske, Yan, and Sherry (2015) highlighted, the number and characterization of subtypes of perfectionism are the subjects of vigorous debate. Added to the classical distinction among subtypes (Rice & Slaney, 2002), Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) suggested a new model of perfectionism (the  $2 \times 2$  model) resulting from the interactions between both dimensions of this construct. These authors proposed a new subtype of perfectionists arising from the combination of low standards but high evaluative concerns. They hypothesized that purely self-critical perfectionists (SC) would get more negative results

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compared to other subtypes, given that lower levels of standards do not ameliorate the relationship between evaluative concerns and negative outcomes (Gaudreau, 2012). The debate about the relevance of this fourth subtype has barely begun, although there is previous work that points to the need for studies that can confirm this (Alden, Ryder, & Mellings, 2002). Rice, Ashby, and Gilman (2011), for instance, indicated that perhaps this group should not be considered perfectionist since subjects do not describe themselves as having standards of excellence. However, several studies have reported that this subtype should be taken into account (Boone, Soenens, Braet, & Goossens, 2010; Wang, Slaney, & Rice, 2007). Following this line, if there are differences between the SC group and the other subtypes (MP, AP, and NP), therapeutic work with these clients should be adapted. Actually, SC possibly gain less benefit from current treatments of perfectionism (Lloyd, Schmidt, Khondoker, & Tchanturia, 2015).

### 1.3. Perfectionism, test anxiety, and pre-exam coping among college students: general and local findings

While perfectionism has been investigated in various contexts, the university environment is one of the most relevant (e.g., Suddarth & Slaney, 2001). Perfectionists excessively value their personal achievements, so it would be assumed that testing situations might result in significant distress. Following this, test anxiety can be conceptualized as a disposition to react with increased anxiety in the face of situations that are related performance-related contexts (Hodapp, Glanzmann, & Laux, 1995). Accordingly, several studies showed that test anxiety was related to perfectionism in students (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003). For instance, findings from a correlational approach yielded that negative perfectionism was strongly associated with test anxiety (Stoeber, Feast, & Hayward, 2009). Other authors have found that this relationship occurred more sharply in female students (Besharat, 2003; Eum & Rice, 2011). Surprisingly, we did not find any study linking perfectionism and test anxiety from a group-based approach, nor from the SC group. In fact, we found only one study (Eum & Rice, 2011) that uses the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R, Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001), which is specifically designed to measure perfectionism on college samples (Enns & Cox, 2002).

Added to these scarce findings, the contribution to this field from Latin American studies was also limited. At this point, we can only mention the psychometric adaptation of multidimensional perfectionism (Arana, Keegan, & Rutzstein, 2009) and multidimensional test anxiety (Heredia, Piemontesi, Furlan & Hodapp, 2008) scales in Argentina.

Finally, another relevant issue for further study in the context of perfectionists students is how they cope before exams. Many studies have offered support for the notion that MP engage more frequently in dysfunctional ways of coping while AP often employ a more functional strategy (Burns & Fedewa, 2005; Flett, Russo, & Hewitt, 1994). Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, Solnik, and Van Brunschot (1996), for example, found that MP use negative problem-solving strategies compared to AP. Apparently, the latter tend to use more flexible coping resources (Karmakar & Ray, 2014; Larjani & Besharat, 2010). Furthermore, Noble, Ashby, and Gnilka (2014) encountered coping as a mediator between perfectionism and depression. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no previous work on how perfectionists deal with specific coping strategies before exams.

### 1.4. This study

Gaudreau (2012) encouraged researchers to scrutinize its  $2 \times 2$  model of perfectionism using not only broad (e.g., composite measures) but also narrow measures of perfectionism (e.g., first-order facets). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to test the  $2 \times 2$  model against four different conditions. First, we established that the APS-R (Slaney et al., 2001) had not already been used to test the model, despite this scale is designed to assess maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism. Moreover, this scale is conceptually unconnected with psychopathological biases (Enns & Cox, 2002). Second, although the  $2 \times 2$  model explored interactions under regression-based models, it becomes clear that this must be mirrored by

a group-based approach as its essence lies, as we understand it, in the distinction among individuals into different subtypes of perfectionism. Third, we proposed two specific dependent variables. We were interested in testing how academic outcomes (test anxiety and pre-exam coping) differed among subtypes of perfectionists in students. Fourth, we addressed the call for cross-cultural research in the perfectionism field (Mobley, Slaney, & Rice, 2005). Although we have not made any statement about how Argentine students might differ from their American counterparts, this study can serve as an exploratory work for the study of perfectionism in Latin Americans.

Hence, our aim is to see whether there are differences among subtypes of perfectionism aimed at a greater dysfunction for SC in dimensions of test anxiety and pre-test coping. Specifically, we hypothesized that SC have the highest levels of test anxiety among subtypes, and AP have less test anxiety than MP. Furthermore, since no conclusive studies have previously been undertaken before, we do not propose any hypothesis about how groups of perfectionists differ among dimensions of pre-exam coping. Nevertheless, we expected to find greater dysfunctional coping for SC following  $2 \times 2$  model's theoretical claims.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 277 students from two public middle-region universities of Argentina: Capital Federal ( $n = 100$ ) and Córdoba ( $n = 175$ ) (2 missing), 81% female, with a mean age of 23.91 ( $SD = 4.76$ ). There were no differences across samples on the main variables. The ethnicity of participants was Latin American. In addition, this study was approved by an ethical committee for each university.

### 2.2. Instruments

Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001; Argentine version: Arana et al., 2009). This scale consists of 23 items tapping three subscales: High Standards ( $\alpha = .75$ , 7 items related to the predilection to impose high standards), Order ( $\alpha = .74$ , with 4 items related to interest and order and neatness) and Discrepancy ( $\alpha = .91$ , with 12 items related to the degree to which respondents perceive the distance between desired and obtained goals). We exclude the Order subscale since it has no predictive contribution to perfectionism construct (Rice & Ashby, 2007). Reliability and factor structure of the Argentine version yielded similar results to the original scale (Arana et al., 2009). As we used only this instrument to measure perfectionism, and for clarity of description, we consider from now on that discrepancy taps the negative dimension of perfectionism, whereas high standards tap the positive dimension of perfectionism.

German Test Anxiety Inventory (GTAI-A; Hodapp, 1991; Argentine version: Heredia, Piemontesi, Furlan, & Hodapp, 2008). This is a self-report measure of 28 items ( $\alpha = .90$ ) which assess dimensions of anxiety about exams: Worry ( $\alpha = .87$ , with 9 items related to thoughts about negative consequences of poor performance), Interference ( $\alpha = .74$ , with 5 items related to cognitions that interfere in testing situation), Emotionality ( $\alpha = .88$ , with 8 items related to perceptions of physiological arousal), and Lack of confidence ( $\alpha = .86$ , with 6 items about trust on one's performance and self-control during the exam situation).

Coping with Pre-Exam Anxiety and Uncertainty (COPEAU-A, Stöber, 2004; Argentine version: Heredia, Piemontesi, Furlan, & Pérez, 2008). It comprised Task-orientation and preparation ( $\alpha = .87$ , refers to strategies that aim to address the situation of stress by anticipating, studying, and planning), Seeking social support ( $\alpha = .85$ , refers to strategies that aim to seek emotional and instrumental support from others to solve situations of stress), and Avoidance ( $\alpha = .70$ , refers to activities that reduce discomfort by distraction, mental and behavioral distancing).

All alphas provided belong to Argentine versions of these scales and were in the range of reliabilities from original studies. Moreover, all

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