



Short Communication

A short empirical note on perfectionism and flourishing

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ABSTRACT

Flourishing describes an optimal state of mental health characterized by emotional, psychological, and social well-being. In a recent publication, Flett and Hewitt (2015) suggested that perfectionism prevents people from flourishing. Perfectionism, however, is a multidimensional personality characteristic, and its various dimensions show different relationships with indicators of subjective well-being. In the first empirical study of perfectionism and flourishing, we examined the relationships of multidimensional perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism) and self-reported flourishing in the past two weeks. Results from the sample of 388 university students revealed that only socially prescribed perfectionism showed a negative relationship with flourishing, whereas self-oriented perfectionism showed a positive relationship. These results were unchanged when positive and negative affect were controlled statistically. Our findings indicate that not all dimensions of perfectionism undermine flourishing and that it is important to differentiate perfectionistic strivings and concerns when regarding the perfectionism–flourishing relationship.

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1. Introduction

Introduced by Keyes (2002), flourishing is an important concept in research on mental health, describing an optimal state that goes beyond satisfaction with life and a positive–negative affect balance (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Instead, flourishing is a combination of emotional, psychological, and social well-being that includes happiness, meaning, engagement, purpose in life, mastery, and personal growth, as well as positive social relations entailing engaging with others and feeling related to others (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2013; Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., in press). A recent publication titled “Managing perfectionism and the excessive striving that undermines flourishing” by two leading perfectionism researchers has suggested that perfectionism undermines flourishing and stands in the way of emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Flett & Hewitt, 2015). Their position presents a challenge for theory and research that has suggested that perfectionism is not always associated with psychological maladjustment, but can be associated with healthy psychological functioning (e.g., Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). How can perfectionism undermine flourishing, as suggested by Flett and Hewitt (2015), and yet at the same time be associated with healthy psychological functioning? This paradox is the subject of this article.

1.1. Multidimensional perfectionism and subjective well-being

A possible answer to this question comes from the observation that perfectionism is multidimensional (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) and that its various dimensions show different associations with psychological maladjustment versus healthy psychological functioning. Research has shown that dimensions reflecting perfectionistic concerns are consistently associated with psychological maladjustment, whereas dimensions reflecting perfectionistic strivings are often associated with healthy psychological functioning (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993), particularly when the overlap between the different dimensions is controlled statistically (for a review, see Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

One of the most influential and widely researched models of perfectionism is Hewitt and Flett’s (1991) which differentiates three dimensions of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are personally important. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism reflects 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 others will be highly critical of them if they fail to meet these expectations.

Whereas other-oriented perfectionism is now regarded as a unique form different from perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings (Stoeber, 2014), research comparing Hewitt and Flett’s (1991) model

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with other perfectionism models concurs that socially prescribed perfectionism is a dimension indicative of perfectionistic concerns, and self-oriented perfectionism is a dimension indicative of perfectionistic strivings (Frost et al., 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Consequently, one would expect socially prescribed perfectionism to show negative relationships with indicators of subjective well-being, and self-oriented perfectionism to show positive relationships.

Research findings clearly support this assertion for socially prescribed perfectionism which has consistently shown negative relationships with satisfaction with life (and sometimes negative correlations with positive affect) and positive relationships with negative affect (e.g., Molnar, Reker, Culp, Sadava, & DeCourville, 2006; Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). For self-oriented perfectionism, the findings are more complex. This is because self-oriented perfectionism often shows positive relationships with both positive and negative affect, and may fail to show positive relationships with satisfaction with life when the overlap with socially prescribed perfectionism is not controlled statistically (e.g., Damian, Stoeber, Negru, & Băban, 2014; Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Once this statistical overlap is controlled, self-oriented perfectionism ceases to show a positive relationship with negative affect and, instead, shows a positive relationship with positive affect only and also with life satisfaction (e.g., Damian et al., 2014; Gaudreau & Verner-Filion, 2012).

1.2. The present study

The present study is the first empirical research on perfectionism and flourishing. To investigate whether perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings show different relationships with flourishing, we used unpublished data in combination with previously published data from Stoeber and Corr (2015).¹ As concerns the three dimensions of Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model, we regarded self-oriented perfectionism as an indicator of perfectionistic strivings and socially prescribed perfectionism as an indicator of perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). To examine whether the relationships were unique for flourishing, we controlled for positive and (the absence of) negative affect as indicators of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999).

Even though this was the first study of perfectionism and flourishing, some expectations could be formulated based on research on perfectionism and subjective well-being. Socially prescribed perfectionism was expected to show a negative relationship with flourishing. Self-oriented perfectionism was not. On the contrary, based on previous research, a positive relationship between self-oriented perfectionism and flourishing was expected, particularly when the overlap with socially prescribed perfectionism was controlled statistically. As regards other-oriented perfectionism, we had no particular expectations because this dimension has shown no clear relationships with subjective well-being (cf. Stoeber, 2014).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 388 students (73 men, 312 women, 1 nondisclosed) at the University of Kent was recruited via the School of Psychology's Research Participation Scheme. Mean age of students was 19.8 years ($SD = 4.0$). Students volunteered to participate for a £50 raffle (~US \$78) or extra course credit and completed all measures online using the School's Qualtrics® platform, which required to respond to all questions to prevent missing data. The study was approved by the relevant ethics committee and followed the British Psychological Society's (2009) code of ethics and conduct.

¹ Stoeber and Corr's article examined perfectionism, reinforcement sensitivity, and positive and negative affect, but did not examine flourishing.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 2004) was used to measure self-oriented perfectionism (15 items; e.g., "I demand nothing less than perfection of myself"), other-oriented perfectionism (15 items; "If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly"), and socially prescribed perfectionism (15 items; "People expect nothing less than perfection from me"). Items were presented with the MPS's standard instruction ("Listed below are a number of statements concerning personal characteristics and traits..."), and participants responded on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.2. Flourishing

The 8-item Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) was used to measure key aspects of flourishing (e.g., "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life," "My social relationships are supportive and rewarding"). Because flourishing is conceptualized as a state (Keyes, 2002) and we were interested in participants' current level of flourishing, items were presented in the past tense (e.g., "I led a purposeful and meaningful life," "My social relationships were supportive and rewarding"), and participants indicated to what extent they had felt this way during the past two weeks using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.3. Positive and negative affect

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to measure positive affect (10 items; e.g., "enthusiastic," "proud") and negative affect (10 items; "distressed," "ashamed") employing the same timeframe as for flourishing. Participants indicated to what extent they had felt each emotion during the past two weeks using a scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

2.3. Data screening

Because multivariate outliers distort the results of correlation and regression analyses, two participants were excluded showing a Mahalanobis distance larger than the critical value of $\chi^2(6) = 22.46$, $p < .001$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). With this, the final sample comprised 386 participants. Next, we examined whether the variance-covariance matrices of male and female participants differed by computing a Box's M test with gender as between-participants factor. The test was nonsignificant ($p = .38$), so analyses were collapsed across

Table 1
Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Perfectionism						
1. Self-oriented perfectionism						
2. Other-oriented perfectionism	.46***					
3. Socially prescribed perfectionism	.47***	.30***				
4. Flourishing	.19***	.10	-.24***			
Affect						
5. Positive affect	.14**	.12*	-.14**	.62***		
6. Negative affect	.16**	.13*	.43***	-.32***	-.07	
<i>M</i>	4.63	3.82	3.80	4.84	3.16	2.35
<i>SD</i>	1.02	0.72	0.85	1.06	0.74	0.77
Cronbach's alpha	.91	.78	.78	.89	.86	.86

Note. $N = 386$. Variables were computed by averaging item responses. Flourishing and affect were measured with a past-two-weeks' timeframe.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

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