



# Multidimensional perfectionism and assortative mating: A perfect date?



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 16 May 2015

Received in revised form 27 May 2015

Accepted 1 June 2015

Available online 18 June 2015

### Keywords:

Multidimensional perfectionism

Assortative mating

Attractiveness

Social disconnection model

Heritability

## ABSTRACT

Assortative mating has been found regarding personality traits, personal attitudes and values, and cognitive abilities, but so far no study has investigated assortative mating regarding multidimensional perfectionism. A total of 422 participants from a non-commercial panel (mean age = 36.0 years) completed measures of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism and rated the attractiveness of four potential dating partners ("dates"): a self-oriented, an other-oriented, a socially prescribed, and a non-perfectionist date. Results showed that all perfectionist dates were seen as less attractive than the non-perfectionist date. This effect, however, was moderated by self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism. Participants high in self-oriented perfectionism found all three perfectionist dates more attractive than participants low in self-oriented perfectionism. Participants high in other-oriented perfectionism found the self-oriented perfectionist date more attractive, and the non-perfectionist date less attractive than participants low in other-oriented perfectionism. The findings are discussed with respect to assortative mating, the social disconnection model of perfectionism, and the heritability of perfectionism.

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## 1. Introduction

After 25 years of research on multidimensional perfectionism (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), we now have extensive knowledge of how different forms of perfectionism are related to psychological well-being and psychological maladjustment (e.g., Lo & Abbott, 2013). Moreover, we know how different forms of perfectionism are related to relationship satisfaction and relationship problems (e.g., Stoeber, 2012). We do not know, however, how attractive perfectionists are to other people as potential relationship partners and if assortative mating—perfectionists preferring other perfectionists as mating partners—regarding multidimensional perfectionism occurs. The question of perfectionists' attractiveness as a potential date (and mate) is important for the social disconnection model of perfectionism (Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, & Caelian, 2006; Sherry, Mackinnon, & Gautreau, *in press*). Moreover, the related question of whether perfectionists are more attractive to other perfectionists than non-perfectionists is important for theories about the heritability of perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald, 2002; Tozzi et al., 2004) as well as general theories of assortative mating related to personality traits (e.g., Le Bon et al., 2013; Rammstedt & Schupp, 2008). The present research represents the first study investigating these questions.

### 1.1. Multidimensional perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by setting exceedingly high standards of performance, critical self-evaluations, critical evaluations of others, and concerns about mistakes and other people's critical evaluations (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). One of the most influential and widely researched conceptualizations of multidimensional perfectionism is Hewitt and Flett's (2004) model which differentiates three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important. Self-oriented perfectionists have exceedingly high personal standards, strive for perfection, expect to be perfect, and are highly self-critical if they fail to meet these expectations. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. Other-oriented perfectionists expect others to be perfect, and are highly critical of others who fail to meet these expectations. 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 their expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004).

### 1.2. Assortative mating

Many studies show that partners in long-term relationships bear a higher resemblance to each other than randomly selected couples with respect to numerous characteristics such as personality traits

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(e.g., Le Bon et al., 2013; Rammstedt & Schupp, 2008), personal attitudes and values (e.g., Feng & Baker, 1994; Luo & Klohnen, 2005), and cognitive abilities (e.g., Mascie-Taylor & Vandenberg, 1988; Watson et al., 2004). This phenomenon is ascribed to the systematic selection of mating partners based on the similarity to oneself, and widely referred to as “assortative mating” (Buss, 1985; Mascie-Taylor, 1988). The assortative choice of relationship partners with respect to psychological characteristics is associated with higher relationship longevity (Rammstedt, Spinath, Richter, & Schupp, 2013) and higher relationship satisfaction (Gonzaga, Carter, & Buckwalter, 2010). Whereas in short-term mate selection, or “dating,” aspects of outward appearance such as physical attractiveness often play a prominent role (e.g., Lee, Loewenstein, Ariely, Hong, & Young, 2008), there are studies indicating that even in the dating phase of a relationship, similarity with respect to psychological characteristics is also of importance and predicts relationship stability over time (e.g., Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, & Baker, 2009).

### 1.3. Is perfectionism attractive?

The question of whether perfectionism is a psychological characteristic that plays a role in dating and assortative mating is difficult to answer because of the lack of research on the subject matter. However, there are numerous studies showing that perfectionism is associated with personality characteristics that are unlikely to be attractive to potential partners. This goes in particular for other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism which have been associated with low agreeableness and high neuroticism, respectively as well as personality traits indicative of personality disorders (Hewitt & Flett, 2004; Stoeber, 2014b). In particular, other-oriented perfectionism has been shown to be a “dark” form of perfectionism associated with uncaring traits, aggressive humor, and a general lack of interest in others (Stoeber, 2014a, in press). However, all three forms of perfectionism have been associated with interpersonal problems (e.g., Flett, Hewitt, Shapiro, & Rayman, 2001; Hill, Zrull, & Turlington, 1997). Furthermore, research on the social disconnection model of perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2006; Sherry et al., in press) suggests that all three forms of perfectionism lead to social disconnection (e.g., loneliness, isolation, alienation) because perfectionists show beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are interpersonally dysfunctional.

### 1.4. The present study

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to examine the attractiveness of perfectionism in dating partners (“dates”) and therefore, per implication, potential mating partners. Moreover, the study examined whether the dates’ attractiveness was influenced by participants’ perfectionism (assortative mating). To this aim, the study measured participants’ self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism and presented participants with vignettes describing a date who was a self-oriented, other-oriented, socially-prescribed, or non-perfectionist. As this was the first study examining multidimensional perfectionism and assortative mating, the study was largely exploratory except for the expectation that perfectionist dates (particularly other-oriented perfectionist dates) would be rated as less attractive than non-perfectionist dates. Moreover, following the literature on assortative mating regarding personality traits, we expected to find evidence of assortative mating regarding perfectionism (i.e., perfectionists being attracted to other perfectionists).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A sample of 422 participants (192 male, 230 female) was recruited via a noncommercial panel maintained by the Heinrich Heine University Duesseldorf, Germany. Mean age of participants was 36.0 years

( $SD = 12.4$ ). Asked about their relationship status, 299 indicated that they were in a relationship and 123 were single. Participants volunteered to participate in the study without financial compensation.

### 2.2. Procedure

All instructions, measures, and vignettes were presented online using Unipark survey software (Questback, 2014) with a setting that required participants to respond to all items to prevent missing data. Participants first completed the perfectionism measure (see 2.3.1). Then they were randomly allocated to one of the four experimental conditions: (a) self-oriented perfectionist date, (b) other-oriented perfectionist date, (c) socially prescribed perfectionist date, or (d) non-perfectionist date. For sensitivity reasons, we did not ask participants about their sexual orientation (hetero-, homo-, bi-sexual), but accounted for differences in sexual orientation by asking participants if they preferred a male (Alex, he), female (Alex, she), or gender-neutral (Alex, he/she) description of the date. Of the 422 participants, 220 (19 male, 201 female) chose a male description, 186 (169 male, 17 female) a female description, and 16 (4 male, 12 female) a gender-neutral description. In each condition, participants read a vignette describing a potential date (see 2.3.2). Afterwards they rated the date’s attractiveness (see Section 2.3.3).

### 2.3. Materials

#### 2.3.1. Perfectionism

To measure perfectionism, we used the German version of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; German version: Altstötter-Gleich, 1998) capturing 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). All three scales showed satisfactory reliability (Cronbach’s alphas = .91, .80, and .85).

#### 2.3.2. Vignettes

Four vignettes were created describing someone as a (a) socially prescribed perfectionist, (b) other-oriented perfectionist, (c) socially prescribed perfectionist, or (d) non-perfectionist (see Supplementary Material). The three perfectionist vignettes were based on Hewitt and Flett’s (2004, p. 6) description of prototypical self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionists and the content of selected items from the MPS short form (Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002). The non-perfectionist vignette was based on the self-oriented perfectionist vignette and described a person who was not a self-oriented perfectionist. The reason for this was twofold. First, self-oriented perfectionism is the form of perfectionism that most people associate with perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 2004). Second, a description of a person who is neither a self-oriented, nor an other-oriented, nor a socially prescribed perfectionist would have resulted in a complex and unrealistic person description of three times the length as the other descriptions, so we restricted the vignette to describe a person who was not a self-oriented perfectionist. In all vignettes, the person was named Alex which, in German-speaking countries, can denote either a male (Alexander) or a female (Alexandra) person.

#### 2.3.3. Attractiveness

To measure the date’s attractiveness, we used a German translation of the attraction to the other scale (Sprecher, 1989), which captures the attractiveness of a person as a relationship partner, and adapted the items to measure the attractiveness of the potential dates described in

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