



Perfectionism, personality, and affective experiences: New insights from revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have linked perfectionism to differences in reinforcement sensitivity, but findings have been mixed. The present study explored the relationships between three forms of perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, socially prescribed) and components of the revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory of personality in relation to the experience of positive and negative affect. In a sample of 388 university students, we found consistent evidence of significant bivariate and semipartial correlations controlling for the overlap between the three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism showed positive relationships with the Behavioral Approach System (BAS), the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS), and the Fight–Flight–Freeze System (FFFS); other-oriented perfectionism showed a negative relationship with the BIS (and was unrelated to the FFFS); and socially prescribed perfectionism showed positive relationships with the BIS and BAS impulsiveness, and a negative relationship with BAS goal-drive persistence (and was unrelated to the FFFS). Furthermore, mediation analyses indicated that the reinforcement sensitivity components (BIS and BAS, but not FFFS) explained differences in how the three forms of perfectionism predicted recent positive and negative affect. These findings open up new empirical avenues in suggesting that fundamental emotion–motivational systems play a key role in the relationship of perfectionism and affective experiences.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Multidimensional perfectionism

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality trait characterized by exceedingly high standards of performance (Frost, Marten, Lahar, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). One of its most influential and widely researched models of perfectionism is that of Hewitt and Flett's (1991) 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 are highly self-critical if they fail to meet their own expectations. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. Other-oriented perfectionists 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 these expectations.

These three forms of perfectionism have shown different relationships with indicators of psychological well-being (Hewitt & Flett, 2004). In particular, self-oriented perfectionism is an ambivalent form of perfectionism showing positive and negative relationships with psychological well-being whereas other-oriented perfectionism usually shows no significant relationship with psychological well-being. In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism is a maladaptive form showing consistent negative relationships with psychological well-being. As regards affective experiences (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), self-oriented perfectionism has shown positive correlations with both positive and negative affect, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism has shown positive correlations with negative affect and, sometimes, negative correlations with positive affect (e.g., Damian, Stoeber, Negru, & Băban, 2014; Flett, Blankstein, & Hewitt, 2009; Molnar, Reker, Culp, Sadava, & DeCourville, 2006). In comparison, other-oriented perfectionism usually shows nonsignificant correlations with negative affect, but may show positive correlations with positive affect (e.g., Flett et al., 2009; Molnar et al., 2006).

1.2. Multidimensional perfectionism and reinforcement sensitivity

The Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory (RST) is a prominent neuropsychological theory of personality explaining the role of individual differences in fear and anxiety-related behaviors as well as approach-

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related behaviors. It assumes the existence of three emotional–motivational systems: one approach system (the Behavioral Approach System, BAS) and two avoidance systems (the Behavioral Inhibition System, BIS; and the Fight–Flight–Freeze System, FFFS). Whereas the BAS has been shown to be related to the experience of positive affect, the BIS and FFFS are related to the experience of negative affect (Corr, 2008). In this, the most distinctive features of the two avoidance systems are emotional output and defensive direction: The BIS activates behavioral repertoire when moving toward threat, eliciting the emotional state of anxiety; in contrast, the FFFS activates behavior that moves the individual away from threat, eliciting the emotional state of fear.

RST is a potentially important theory for research on multidimensional perfectionism because it may help explain why perfectionism is related to positive and negative affect. A number of studies have investigated perfectionism and components of RST using Carver and White's (1994) BIS/BAS Scales to differentiate the BIS, and three aspects of the BAS (reward responsiveness, drive, and fun seeking). As regards Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of perfectionism, a study described by Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, and Macdonald (2002) found all three forms of perfectionism to show positive correlations with the BIS. In addition, self-oriented perfectionism showed positive correlations with the BAS (reward responsiveness and drive). By comparison, Kaye, Conroy, and Fifer (2008) found only self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism to show positive correlations with the BIS, but not other-oriented perfectionism. Moreover, when they combined BAS reward responsiveness, drive, and fun seeking to an overall BAS score, they found self-oriented perfectionism to show positive correlations with the BAS whereas socially prescribed perfectionism showed a negative correlation.¹

The only study so far addressing how multidimensional perfectionism is related to revised RST is by Randles, Flett, Nash, McGregor, and Hewitt (2010) who examined two samples of university students using a reformulation of the BIS/BAS Scales to differentiate the BIS from the FFFS (Heym, Ferguson, & Lawrence, 2008). Across samples, self-oriented perfectionism showed positive correlations with the BIS, BAS reward responsiveness, and BAS drive, and socially prescribed perfectionism showed a positive correlation with the BIS. Otherwise, findings were mixed. In one sample, other-oriented perfectionism showed positive correlations with the BIS, BAS reward responsiveness, and BAS drive, and a negative correlation with the FFFS. In the other sample, other-oriented perfectionism showed no significant correlations with any component of revised RST. In addition, socially prescribed perfectionism showed an unexpected positive correlation with BAS reward responsiveness in one sample.

Notwithstanding some unexpected and nonsignificant correlations, when taken together, the findings from previous studies on multidimensional perfectionism and reward sensitivity provide two pieces of converging evidence. First, both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism show consistent positive correlations with the BIS. Second, only self-oriented perfectionism shows consistent positive correlations with the BAS (particularly reward responsiveness and drive). In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism does not show a consistent pattern of correlations across studies.

1.3. The present study

The previous studies on multidimensional perfectionism and reinforcement sensitivity have a number of limitations. First, the three forms of perfectionism show considerable overlap—with correlations between the three forms ranging into the .50s (Hewitt & Flett, 2004)—and none of the studies controlled for this overlap when investigating the relationships between these three forms and various RST

components. Therefore, some of these unexpected and inconsistent correlations may be due to variance redundancy, and more consistent relationships may emerge when unique relationships are examined by statistically controlling for this overlap. Second, so far only one study investigated multidimensional perfectionism and components of revised RST (Randles et al., 2010), so clearly more research is needed. Third, there have been further recent developments in revised RST as regards theory, research, and measurement.

Reflecting further refinement and theoretical elaboration of RST (Corr & McNaughton, 2008, 2012; McNaughton & Corr, 2004), Corr and Cooper (2015) developed a new psychometric measure of revised RST—the Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory Personality Questionnaire (RST-PQ)—capturing individual differences the BIS, the FFFS, and four aspects of the BAS (reward interest, goal-drive persistence, reward reactivity, and impulsivity) as well as defensive fight, which provides the means to provide a more comprehensive investigation of perfectionism–RST relationships.

Consequently, the aim of the present study was to examine the unique relationships of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism with the components of the revised RST captured by the RST-PQ. In addition, the study aimed to investigate whether RST mediates the relationship between perfectionism and affective experiences. Randles et al. (2010) argued that the BIS serves as a mediator between multidimensional perfectionism and psychological maladjustment, and the mediation analysis they conducted found that the BIS mediated the effect of socially prescribed perfectionism on rumination (socially prescribed perfectionism → BIS → rumination), which is a cognitive vulnerability factor closely related to negative affect (e.g., Kirkegaard Thomsen, 2006). The present study aimed to expand on Randles et al.'s findings by further exploring mediation effects of revised RST regarding positive and negative affect (Watson et al., 1988).

In line with previous findings showing self-oriented perfectionism to be associated with positive affect once the overlap with socially prescribed perfectionism is controlled for (e.g., Molnar et al., 2006), we expected self-oriented perfectionism to show unique positive relationships with positive affect. Moreover, we expected the BAS to mediate these relationships. In contrast, we expected socially prescribed perfectionism to show unique positive relationships with negative affect, and the BIS to mediate these relationships. In contrast, the analyses for other-oriented perfectionism were largely exploratory because other-oriented perfectionism has not shown any clear pattern of relationships with BIS/BAS in previous studies (cf. 1.2).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 388 students (73 men, 312 women, 1 preferred not to state his/her gender) at the University of Kent was recruited via the School of Psychology's Research Participation Scheme. Mean age of students was 19.8 years ($SD = 4.0$). Using the categories of the university's equal opportunities monitoring form, students indicated their ethnicity as White (68%), Black (11%), Asian (10%), mixed race (6%), and other (5%). 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 them to respond to all questions to prevent missing data.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

The 45-item Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 2004) was used to measure self-oriented perfectionism (e.g., "I demand nothing less than perfection of myself"), other-oriented perfectionism ("If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly"), and socially prescribed perfectionism ("People expect nothing

¹ Kaye et al. presented the BIS/BAS Scales with a response scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*) so the signs of the correlations in their Table 2 need to be reversed before interpretation.

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