



Perfectionism in the Transactional Stress Model



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ABSTRACT

Applying an experimental between-subject design with varying situational demands ($N = 168$) we investigated the main and interactive effects of perfectionistic strivings (PS) and perfectionistic concerns (PC) on primary threat appraisal and secondary self-confidence appraisal and if these appraisals mediate the effects of PS and PC on the affective stress-response to a given situation. Path analyses revealed differential effects of experimental condition, PS and PC on the cognitive appraisals and the affective stress response. While the positive effects of PS on cognitive appraisals did not extend to the affective stress response directly or indirectly, the negative effect of PC on the affective stress response was fully mediated by the secondary self-confidence appraisal. Additionally we found a significant three-way interaction of PS, PC and experimental condition predicting the affective stress response that was not mediated by the cognitive appraisals.

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1. Introduction

A person's reaction to a given situation is not determined directly by the objective situation but by the person's subjective interpretation of the situation or the situation as it is perceived by the person (e.g. Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Rauthmann, 2012). Diathesis stress models specify this general principle and assume that potential stressors result in affective and physiological stress responses only if an individual is vulnerable to a stressor in a given situation (Lazarus, 2006).

1.1. The Transactional Stress Model

Focusing on cognitive appraisals and coping efforts the Transactional Stress Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) extends basic diathesis stress models by process variables that are hypothesized to mediate the relationship between person and situation on the one hand and affective and physiological stress responses on the other hand. Concerning cognitive appraisals Lazarus and Folkman distinguish between primary and secondary appraisals. *Primary appraisal* describes how relevant an upcoming situation is perceived for a personal goal or value and to what degree this goal or value is threatened. *Secondary appraisal* focuses on the person's evaluation of general options to deal with the

situation (control expectancy) and on the subject's conviction that he or she has the specific abilities necessary to deal with the situation (self-confidence). Both appraisals influence each other mutually and determine extent and type of the stress responses. Various studies have shown that negative affective (e.g. Lee-Flynn, Pomaki, DeLongis, Biesanz, & Puterman, 2011; Nezlek, Vansteelandt, Van Mechelen, & Kuppens, 2008) and endocrine (e.g. Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Gaab, Rohleder, Nater, & Ehler, 2005) stress responses occur when a person appraises a situational demand as threatening (primary appraisal) and his or her personal resources as insufficient to deal with the demand effectively (secondary self-confidence appraisal). According to Lazarus (2006) person variables that influence the appraisal and coping processes are personal commitments or goals, and beliefs about the self, the world, and personal resources. Empirical evidence revealed that personality variables such as neuroticism, extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness (e.g., Penley & Tomaka, 2002; Shewchuk, Elliott, MacNair-Semands, & Harkins, 1999; Tong, 2010) or locus of control (Parkes, 1984) constitute specific constellations of commitments and beliefs that can be successfully integrated into the Transactional Stress Model.

1.2. Perfectionism and cognitive appraisals

Another personality construct associated with stress (e.g., Blankstein, Lumley, & Crawford, 2007; Cox, Clara, & Enns, 2009; Molnar, Sadava, Flett, & Colautti, 2012) and stress related diseases (e.g., Hill, 2013; Shafran & Mansell, 2001) is perfectionism.

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Perfectionism is a multi-facet construct that can be summarized as setting of and striving for extremely high standards (perfectionistic strivings, PS) combined with a more or less critical evaluation of one's own behavior and concerns about the consequences of not living up one's standards (perfectionistic concerns, PC) (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006 for an overview). Hewitt and Flett (2002) outline the central role of stress in perfectionism research stating that “perfectionistic behavior is associated with psychopathology through its association with and influence on stress” (p. 257). While the assumption that stress mediates the effects of perfectionism on various indices of maladjustment is well documented (especially for the PC-dimension) (e.g., Chang, Watkins, & Banks, 2004; Molnar et al., 2012; Tashman, Tenenbaum, & Eklund, 2010), processes that mediate the influence of perfectionism on stress are not well explored. An integration of perfectionism as personality variable into the Transactional Stress Model, providing such process assumptions, is a promising approach to close this gap.

The main concerns of the present study are effects of PS and PC on primary and secondary appraisals and if these appraisals mediate the effects of PS and PC on the stress-experience in a given situation. The definition of perfectionism indicates that PS and PC reflect specific commitments and beliefs that might be readily integrated into the Transactional Stress Model to explain perfectionism-specific stress-appraisals and -reactions. More specifically, the personal commitment to extremely high standards (PS) should generally increase the perceived relevance but not threat of a given performance situation (primary appraisal), and the commitment to the active striving for those standards might be associated with higher self-confidence (secondary appraisal). In contrast, the belief that even small deviations from the ideal are extremely detrimental (PC) should increase the perceived threat in a situation (primary appraisal). Additionally, this overly critical self-evaluation should be associated with a lower self-confidence (secondary appraisal). Thus, high PC entail negative primary and secondary appraisals that in turn lead to negative psychological outcomes, whereas high PS might be regarded as a “healthy pursuit of excellence” (Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002, p. 778).

There are many studies on the relationship between perfectionism and variables that might be subsumed under primary and secondary appraisal, such as threat and its affective and motivational indicators (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004; DiBartolo & Varner, 2012; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008), self-esteem, self-efficacy, perceived self-control and locus of control (e.g., Achtziger & Bayer, 2013; Blankstein et al., 2007; Lo & Abbott, 2013; Periasamy & Ashby, 2002). While these findings provide initial support for an integration of perfectionism into the Transactional Stress Model, most of these studies did not assess indicators of anticipatory primary and secondary appraisals as process variables that might explain associations of PS and PC with stress-responses in a concrete situation. Achtziger and Bayer (2013), for example, found that the negative effect of PS on perceived stress in the last three month was fully mediated by perceived self-control, whereas the positive effect of PC was partially mediated by lowered self-control. While successfully testing a mediation model via a potential indicator of secondary appraisal, this study did not assess anticipatory primary and secondary appraisals in a concrete situation. Wirtz et al. (2007), on the other hand, found that PC was not only associated with an increased endocrine stress reaction to a socio-evaluative stress task (Trier Social Stress Test, TSST; Kirschbaum, Pirke, & Hellhammer, 1993) but also to higher trait anxiety, higher primary threat appraisal, and to lower secondary self-confidence appraisal. Although this study assessed anticipatory appraisals in a standardized situation, this study did neither test for differential effects of PS nor for mediating effects of the appraisal variables.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to integrate specific facets of PS and PC into the Transactional Stress Model. Thereby the first aim of the present study was to investigate primary threat appraisal and secondary self-confidence appraisal as potential mediators between perfectionism and the affective stress-response. We assumed that

- (1) PC is positively related to the affective stress response in a performance situation, and this relationship is mediated by primary threat and secondary self-confidence appraisals.
- (2) PS is negatively related to the affective stress response in a performance situation and this relationship is mediated by primary threat and secondary self-confidence appraisals.

The second aim of the study was to extend prior research by investigating interactive effects of PS and PC. Group-based models of perfectionism (e.g., Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; Stoeber & Otto, 2006) call for the inclusion of interactive effects of PS and PC besides just controlling for the shared variance of both dimensions in multiple regression analyses.

The third aim of our study was to investigate the main and interactive effects of PS and PC under two experimental conditions of high vs. low in situational demand (cf. Zureck, Altstötter-Gleich, Wolf, & Brand, 2014) in order to explore two assumptions of Hewitt and Flett (2002) on perfectionism as vulnerability factor: The perfectionist's (PC's) high sensitivity to deviations from an ideal performance should “turn a relatively benign situation into a stressful encounter” (p. 262) and positive effects of PS have to be challenged by a situation in which standards cannot be reached.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of $N = 168$ students participated in the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.9$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.5$; 68% female; 70 psychology, 98 non-psychology).

2.2. Procedure

In order to control for baseline group differences, participants completed a perfectionism questionnaire (see description below) before the actual testing session and were parallelized according to their scores of PS and PC. Using a *between subjects design*, participants were assigned to a highly demanding (TSST, $n = 85$) or a less demanding (Placebo, $n = 83$) experimental condition. The two groups were comparable with regard to age, gender, and major distribution. For the experimental manipulation of situational demand we applied the standard protocol of the TSST introduced by Kirschbaum et al. (1993) and its Placebo version adopted by Het, Rohleder, Schoofs, Kirschbaum, and Wolf (2009). The TSST consists of a preparation time (5 min), a simulated job interview (5 min), and a highly demanding arithmetic task (5 min) in front of a two-person committee, a video-camera and a microphone. This procedure is effective in inducing endocrine and affective stress responses (see Kirschbaum et al., 1993). The Placebo-TSST consists of a preparation time (5 min), a talk about a recent leisure experience (5 min), and a less demanding arithmetic task (5 min) while alone in the experimental room. This procedure has proved to be an adequate control condition (see Het et al., 2009).

Values of the affective stress state were assessed immediately before (baseline) and after (post-stressor) the experimental manipulation. All items were presented in German. At the end of each individual testing session participants were fully debriefed.

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