Comparing perfectionist types on family environment and well-being among Hong Kong adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the associations between family environment factors and perfectionist types among 491 Hong Kong high school students. Participants who reported being from a family oriented to high achievement were more likely classified as perfectionists, and more so maladaptive perfectionists. Other family environment factors also differentiated adaptive from maladaptive perfectionists. The three perfectionist types were also compared on self-efficacy, self-esteem, rebellious and antisocial behaviors. Further results and implications are provided.

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1. Introduction

One of the best ways to obtain insight into the nature of any personality construct is to examine the factors and processes that contribute to its development (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald, 2002). While numerous studies have focused on perfectionism and its association with other psychological variables, relatively few studies have explored factors influencing the development of perfectionism (DiPrima, Ashby, Gnilka, & Noble, 2011). Over two decades, studies have focused on identifying the multidimensionality of perfectionism (i.e. subtypes such as adaptive perfectionism and maladaptive perfectionism) providing evidence that each dimension possesses different clinical implications (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Also, utilizing the multidimensionality of perfectionism, individuals can be categorized into different types of perfectionists.

As conceptualized by early researchers (e.g. Hamachek, 1978), people can be classified as adaptive (normal) perfectionists or maladaptive (neurotic) perfectionists, based on the combination of different aspects of perfectionism. Two core Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney, Mobley, Trippi, Ashby, & Johnson, 1996) subscales—Standards and Discrepancy—are used as indicators for classification. While Standards measures the expectations one sets for performance, Discrepancy measures the perceived gap between one's expectations and performance, and serves as the core factor differentiating whether a person's perfectionistic tendencies are adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive perfectionists possess high goals, and strive for the rewards associated with achieving those goals, while also being satisfied with their performance. In contrast, maladaptive perfectionists set unattainably high standards for themselves, and lack the ability to take pleasure in their own performance or recognize their capabilities (Hamachek, 1978). An emerging body of evidence supports the validity of this two-factor model of perfectionism (Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Several theoretical frameworks pointing to the origin of perfectionism during childhood appear within the research literature. According to general psychology and sociology literature, the family climate represents one of the most salient socio-environmental dimensions influencing a child's development. In particular, Social Expectation Theory highlights the importance of family environment in the development of perfectionism. It suggests that parents of perfectionistic children tend not to reward the efforts of their offspring overtly and regularly. Positive feedback is reserved only for occasions when their highest expectations are fulfilled. The high expectations create a situation where imperfection in performance portends something ominous; the child must constantly strive towards even higher performance standards as they seek to attain the approval of their parents. The child may also belittle their own accomplishments as they feel they have never quite fulfilled parental expectations (Appleton, Hill, & Hill, 2010).

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Recently, studies have examined factors involved in the development of different perfectionism dimensions. For example, DiPrima et al. (2011) examined the relationship between family variables and found adaptive perfectionism to be positively associated with numerous positive family variables (e.g. parental approval, emphasis on individual growth of family members), whereas maladaptive perfectionists reported less parental nurturance compared to adaptive perfectionists. Enns and Cox (2002) found parenting characterized by high expectations for self and child ('perfectionistic' parenting) related to both adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism, but harsh parenting to be only associated with maladaptive perfectionism. Moreover, a recent qualitative study of perfectionists and non-perfectionists (Hibbard & Walton, 2012) found a salient difference between the two; the former group reported feeling more pressured from their families to succeed, and their parents were overly critical of their mistakes when they were growing up. These studies highlight the importance of family environment in the development of childhood perfectionism. However, there is still a need to better establish the empirical support across diverse cultures.

In general, there are cultural variations of how the family environment impacts individuals. For example, traditional Asian culture is more collectivistic in nature and values family reputation and conformity to familial expectations more than Western cultures (Triandis, 1995). Thus, the family factor could have different impacts across cultures in the development process of perfectionism as well. This makes it important to examine how family environment relates to the development of perfectionism across cultures. For instance, studies conducted in the U.S. have suggested Asian Americans reporting higher levels of maladaptive perfectionism in the forms of parental expectations and criticism (Castro & Rice, 2003) and family discrepancy (Wang, 2010) than their European American counterparts. It is important to take into consideration that traditional Asian culture is more collectivistic in nature with an emphasis on conforming to familial expectations more than individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1995). This often means that individuals will be deliberately fitting in with the wishes or expectations of others in order to maintain harmony, and tend to find ways to coexist, cooperate and comply with others (Yeh & Hwang, 2000). In the case of Chinese children growing up, this may mean constantly having to strive to reach the very high expectations their parents place on them for academic success. The process of parents provoking feelings of shame through linking losing face (tiu lien) with children's failure to meet family expectations (Fung, Lieber, & Leung, 2003) seems to be reminiscent of the perfectionism dimension focusing on discrepancy (Wang, Slaney, & Rice, 2007). This pressure can influence the development of a tendency toward adaptive or maladaptive perfectionism in the children. Clearly, more studies aimed to better understand perfectionism within different ethnic groups is needed.

1.1. Current study

This study examined the association between family environment and multidimensional perfectionism in a Chinese adolescent sample in Hong Kong. In particular, we examined family factors that differentiated not only perfectionists from non-perfectionists, but also maladaptive perfectionists from adaptive perfectionists. We hypothesized that achievement orientation would be positively associated with being classified as perfectionists. In addition, these different types of perfectionists were examined and compared to confirm and further establish their adaptive and maladaptive characteristics. So the second aim of the study was to compare adaptive, maladaptive, and non-perfectionists on psychological, behavioral, and achievement variables related to adolescent adjustment—such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and risk behaviors.

We anticipated that adaptive perfectionists would have higher self-efficacy and self-esteem than maladaptive perfectionists.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 491 high school students from Hong Kong; 57% males, 43% females. Ages ranged from 14 to 21 years, with a mean of 16.71 (S.D. = 1.32). In terms of grade level, 31% were in the 10th year, 29% were in the 11th year, 17% were in the 12th year, and 23% were in the 13th year of schooling.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos, 1974)

The FES is a 90-item scale that measures perception of one's family environment. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Construct validity have been demonstrated through the associations of FES with depression and self-constructs among Hong Kong adolescents (Lau & Kwok, 2000). In past studies, the Cronbach alphas of FES subscale scores ranged from .55 to .90, with several low internal consistencies (Phillips, West, Shen, & Zheng, 1998). However, FES was chosen for this study due to its wide use in past research, which provides better bases for comparing across studies. To address the internal consistency issue, only six subscales with adequate internal consistencies were used in this study. Cronbach alphas for the current sample are: Cohesion (8 items, α = .85), Conflict (8 items, α = .80), Achievement (5 items, α = .64), Intellectual-Cultural (9 items, α = .69), Organization (8 items, α = .66), and Control (8 items, α = .70).

2.2.2. Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 1996)

The APS-R includes three subscales: Standards (7 items), Order (3 items), and Discrepancy (9 items). Chinese version of the APS-R was modified by excluding four items from the original APS-R (three Discrepancy items and one Order item) following factor analyses results from a previous study with Hong Kong adolescents (Wang, Yuen, & Slaney, 2009). APS-R has been supported through its empirical associations with constructs such as depression, self-esteem, and achievement among various cultural groups (e.g., Wang et al., 2007). The Cronbach alphas for APS-R subscale scores ranged from .73 to .86 in a sample of Hong Kong adolescents (Wang et al., 2009), and it ranged from .77 to .87 for the current sample.

2.2.3. Personal-Social Development Self-Efficacy Inventory (PSD-SEI; Yuen et al., 2004a)

The PSD-SEI is a 60-item scale that assesses personal-social development self-efficacy among adolescents, which includes 7 factors: Self-Realization, Leadership & Teamwork, Emotional, Physical & Social Wellness, Interests & Life Goals, Relationships, Avoiding Drugs, Excessive Drinking & Smoking, and Finance & Self-Care. The total PSD-SEI score had a Cronbach alpha of .95 in a previous study (Yuen et al., 2004a), and was .96 in this study. Construct validity was supported by higher achieving students reporting higher PSD-SEI scores (Yuen et al., 2004a).

2.2.4. Academic Development Self-Efficacy Inventory (AD-SEI; Yuen et al., 2004b)

The AD-SEI is a 20-item scale that assesses personal-social development self-efficacy among adolescents, which includes five factors: Time Management, Study & Examination Skills, Learning from Friends, Educational Planning, and Being a Responsible