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Does socially prescribed perfectionism predict daily conflict? A 14-day daily diary study of romantic couples using self- and partner-reports



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ABSTRACT

People high in partner-specific socially prescribed perfectionism view their romantic partners as rigidly demanding perfection of them. Case histories and theoretical accounts identify conflict with romantic partners as a recurrent, core interpersonal problem for people high in partner-specific socially prescribed perfectionism. Most research in this area uses mono-source, cross-sectional designs. The present study advances this research by studying perfectionism and conflict in 226 romantic couples using a 14-day daily diary design involving self- and partner-reports. As hypothesized, self- and partner-reports of partner-specific socially prescribed perfectionism correlated moderately. Results for men were consistent with hypotheses: Self- and partner-reports of partner-specific socially prescribed perfectionism predicted changes in self- and partner-reports of conflict, even after controlling for reassurance-seeking and previous day's conflict. Contrary to hypotheses, reassurance-seeking was a better predictor of conflict for women. Results indicate men high in partner-specific socially prescribed perfectionism engage in self-defeating interpersonal behaviors. They are over concerned about—yet in daily conflict with—their partners.

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1. Introduction

Some people have personality traits that impede their ability to participate in positive interpersonal relationships. Perfectionism represents one such trait. Perfectionism is related to interpersonal problems, even after controlling for well-established predictors of interpersonal problems (e.g., neuroticism; Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, & Caelian, 2006). Nonetheless, gaps exist in our understanding of the association between perfectionism and interpersonal problems. We address these gaps by conducting a rigorous, comprehensive test of the perfectionism-interpersonal problems connection. Specifically, we study perfectionism and daily conflict in romantic couples using a daily diary design with self- and partner-reports.

There are several dimensions of perfectionism (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Among these, people high in socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP; i.e., perceiving others as demanding perfection of oneself) are likely to gener-

ate and/or perceive negative social interactions (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Indeed, SPP is consistently linked with interpersonal problems (Hewitt et al., 2006). In the present study, we operationalize SPP in partner-specific terms (see Stoeber, 2012). Partner-specific SPP involves a maladaptive social schema predisposing people to view their romantic partners as requiring perfection (e.g., “My partner expects nothing less than perfection from me”).

We examine partner-specific SPP in relation to daily conflict (i.e., daily hostile, critical, rejecting, and inconsiderate behaviors directed toward a romantic partner). We focus on daily conflict because theoretical accounts identify it as central to socially prescribed perfectionists' interpersonal problems (Hewitt et al., 2006). Such people appear to think (e.g., perceive partners as demanding), feel (e.g., exhibit negative affect around partners), and behave (e.g., avoid partners) in ways that generate daily conflict with their romantic partners (Mackinnon et al., 2012). Consistent with our conceptualization, partner-specific SPP is linked to lower dyadic adjustment in marital relationships (Haring, Hewitt, & Flett, 2003) and lower satisfaction in dating relationships (Stoeber, 2012).

Most perfectionism studies use cross-sectional, mono-source designs. Cross-sectional designs neglect questions of temporal

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precedence, whereas mono-source designs involve potential biases (e.g., defensiveness). People may become accustomed to their behavior, failing to report it accurately. Additionally, people high in SPP feel pressured to be perfect and may conceal imperfections in self-report measures (Sherry et al., 2013).

The three perfectionism studies with informants found self- and informant reports of SPP correlated moderately (r s from .23 to .39). These studies involved best friends (Flett, Besser, & Hewitt, 2005), mothers and daughters (Mushquash, Sherry, Sherry, & Allen, 2013), and “mixed” informants (e.g., friends, parents, etc.; Sherry et al., 2013). A study with romantic partners as informants is novel. Romantic partners are well-acquainted, have shared histories, and witness behaviors across contexts. Moreover, little is known about perfectionism and interpersonal problems in men, as relevant studies involve mainly women (Sherry et al., 2013).

Socially prescribed perfectionists are rarely studied in dyads. Instead, they are studied as individuals apart from interpersonal context. By studying romantic relationships, researchers can investigate socially prescribed perfectionists in a more contextualized, ecologically valid way. It is also unclear if the link between partner-specific SPP and conflict holds after accounting for competing variables. An apparent link between these constructs may be an artifact arising from shared variance with third variables (e.g., reassurance-seeking).

Our study overcomes problems in past work. Our daily diary design increases reliability (due to multiple reporting occasions) and reduces recall bias (by collecting data closer to an event’s occurrence). We also studied romantic couples and supplemented self-reports with partner-reports. Our sample is equal parts men and women, allowing us to study partner-specific SPP and daily conflict in both genders. Moreover, we tested if the relation between partner-specific SPP and daily conflict holds after controlling for reassurance-seeking (i.e., excessively asking your partner if he/she cares about you). Reassurance-seeking is a suitable covariate as it shares variance with perfectionism and conflict (Starr & Davila, 2008).

Building on past work (Sherry et al., 2013), we hypothesized self- and partner-reports of partner-specific SPP would correlate moderately. We also hypothesized self- and partner-reports of partner-specific SPP would predict changes in self- and partner-reports of daily conflict after controlling for reassurance-seeking and previous day’s conflict. No gender differences were hypothesized, given the paucity of evidence.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants met inclusion criteria: They had internet access; at least one member of the couple was attending university; they were in a romantic relationship for ≥ 3 months; they had face-to-face contact ≥ 5 days a week. Inclusion criteria helped to ensure members of romantic couples had a history of frequent interaction. In total, 226 heterosexual couples were recruited (226 men; 226 women). Men averaged 22.35 years of age ($SD = 4.52$); women averaged 21.48 years of age ($SD = 4.13$). Most participants self-identified as Caucasian (men 88.5%; women 88.5%), reported face-to-face contact with their partner an average of 6.44 days per week ($SD = 0.84$), and were in a relationship with their partner an average of 2.10 years ($SD = 2.23$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Partner-specific SPP

Self-reports of SPP were measured using the 5-item short form of the SPP scale from Hewitt and Flett (1991) *Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale*. Items were modified to be partner-specific

(e.g., “My family expects me to be perfect” was changed to “My partner expects me to be perfect”). Mackinnon et al. (2012) conducted a psychometric study supporting the alpha reliability and convergent validity of this partner-specific self-report measure.

Partner-reports of SPP were measured using the 5-item short form of the SPP scale from Hewitt and Flett (1991) *Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale*. Self-report items (e.g., “My partner expects me to be perfect”) were modified into partner-report items (e.g., “My partner believes that I expect them to be perfect”). Participants responded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) for self- and partner-reports of SPP. Scores range from 5 to 35 for self-reports of SPP and from 5 to 35 for partner-reports of SPP. Our partner-report measure of SPP was created for this study; research on its psychometrics is limited. Mackinnon et al. (2012) found this partner-report measure has an alpha reliability of .84 and correlates significantly ($r = .59$) with a partner-report measure of concern over mistakes (Frost et al., 1990), supporting the convergent validity of this measure.

2.2.2. Reassurance-seeking

Self-reports of reassurance-seeking were measured using the 4-item reassurance-seeking scale from Joiner and Metalsky (2001) *Depressive Interpersonal Relationships Inventory*. Items were modified to be partner-specific (e.g., “Do you frequently seek reassurance from the people you feel close to as to whether they care about you?” was changed to “Do you frequently seek reassurance from your partner as to whether they care about you?”). Participants responded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Scores range from 4 to 28 for this scale. Studies support the alpha reliability and convergent validity of this self-report measure (Joiner & Metalsky, 2001).

2.2.3. Daily conflict

Self-reports of daily conflict were measured using Murray, Bellavia, Rose, and Griffin (2003) 7-item scale of rejecting interpersonal behaviors (e.g., “I insulted my partner”). A psychometric study by Mackinnon et al. (2012) supported the alpha reliability and convergent validity of this self-report measure.

Partner-reports of daily conflict were measured using Murray et al. (2003) 7-item scale of rejecting interpersonal behaviors (e.g., “My partner insulted me”). For both self- and partner-reports of daily conflict, participants responded on a 9-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) and used a 24-h timeframe. Scores range from 7 to 63 for self-reports of daily conflict and from 7 to 63 for partner-reports of daily conflict. Evidence supports the alpha reliability and convergent validity of this partner-report measure (Murray et al., 2003).

2.3. Procedure

Dalhousie University’s Ethics Board approved our study. Couples were recruited via flyers and Dalhousie University’s Psychology participant pool. In Phase 1, participants completed measures of partner-specific SPP and reassurance-seeking in a lab. Phase 2 began the next day and lasted 14 consecutive days. We used a 14-day period to account for possible day-of-the-week effects and to allow for numerous interactions between members of couples. In Phase 2, each night before bed, participants completed an online questionnaire assessing daily conflict. Participants received daily email reminders. Participants received \$25 or \$10 and three bonus credits as compensation.

2.4. Protocol compliance and data analytic plan

In Phase 1, missing data were minimal, with participants providing >99.0% of data. In phase 2, 80.2% of daily dairies were usable

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