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Differential roles of positive and negative perfectionism in predicting occupational eustress and distress

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ABSTRACT

Although perfectionism is often associated with increased occupational stress, little research has explored the differential roles of adaptive (positive perfectionism [PP]) and maladaptive (negative perfectionism [NP]) perfectionism in predicting psychological responses to stressors. Applying the Holistic Model of Stress, this study examined the role of perfectionism in explaining positive (eustress) and negative (distress) stress responses, as indicated by vigor and strain. Participants were 156 employees (73 academic, 83 administrative) from a tertiary institution who completed self-report questionnaires, consisting of the Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale, Personal Strain Questionnaire (involving vocational, psychological, interpersonal, and physical strain), Shirom-Melamed Vigor Measure, and Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. Correlations and hierarchical multiple regressions assessed how PP and NP predicted vigor and strain. After controlling for social desirability, higher PP predicted greater vigor, and lower vocational and physical strain; whereas higher NP predicted less vigor, and greater vocational, psychological, interpersonal, and physical strain. Therefore, PP and NP are evidently different in the understanding of responses to stressors. Promoting PP may aid in lowering strain perceptions associated with one's job and body. Interventions to cope with increased NP could improve overall well-being.

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is an achievement-based behavioural characteristic defined as the setting of excessively high performance standards and overly critical evaluations of one's behaviour (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Convergence in theory and data on the nature of perfectionism has distinguished between two major types of perfectionism: Adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism (Slade & Owens, 1998). The former is a predominantly normal behavioural characteristic which benefits the individual, whereas the latter is pathological and predictive of maladaptive behaviours. Although there are many ways in which the subtypes of perfectionism have been defined and debated (e.g., Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010), this study applied the theoretically-sound delineation of Positive (PP) and Negative (NP) Perfectionism to exemplify adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, respectively. This distinction rests on Skinner's reinforcement theory: Despite being overtly similar behaviours, PP refers to the cognitions and behaviours directed towards achieving high-level goals as driven by positive reinforcement and a desire for success, whereas NP refers to those driven by negative reinforcement and a fear of failure. Together, PP and NP form a dual process model of perfectionism (Slade & Owens, 1998).

Past research has revealed positive relationships between PP and adaptive behaviours as well as between NP and maladaptive behaviours in various contexts, including eating problems (Chan, Ku, & Owens, 2010), motivation and affect (Bergman, Nyland, & Burns, 2007), and neurocognitive performance (Slade, Coppel, & Townes, 2009). Although perfectionism in itself, or when defined using other scales, has often been shown to relate to increased stress among daytime employees (Childs & Stoeber, 2010), few occupational health studies have applied the PP–NP distinction when examining the perfectionism-stress links. Moreover, virtually no study has linked PP and NP to adaptive and maladaptive aspects of occupational stress simultaneously. Besides providing a strong theoretical basis to explain any predictive differences between the perfectionism dimensions, this design can be useful to explore the multidimensionality of perfectionism in the context of positive and negative responses to workplace stressors. This study applied the Holistic Model of Stress (Nelson & Simmons, 2003), which examines how individual differences, including perfectionism, simultaneously predict positive and negative psychological responses to stressors. The positive response, eustress, is the extent to which the cognitive appraisal of a situation is perceived to enhance well-being; whereas its negative

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counterpart, distress, is the extent to which the appraisal of a situation decreases well-being.

In this study, the role of perfectionism in predicting eustress and distress was assessed among a group of university employees. Studies among academic and administrative university employees have revealed rising stress levels over the past three decades (Abouserie, 1996; Gmelch, Wilke, & Lovrich, 1986; Watts & Robertson, 2011). University employees experience significant stressors from many different areas of work, including time constraints, student interaction, teaching responsibilities, and research demands. This may render them more susceptible to perfectionism and its associated behaviours, since there are more areas of work in which they may set high-level goals. Thus, studying a potential group of perfectionists among university employees may amplify the perfectionism–stress relationships, in addition to further understanding the behavioural characteristics that can predict occupational stress within this population. University employees have previously reported various health problems, strained relationships, poorer quality of life, along with a decrease in teaching and research quality, job satisfaction and organisational commitment, due to occupational stress (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001); but the role that PP and NP might play remains unclear.

Not surprisingly, researchers have looked at relationships between perfectionism and occupational stress in universities, but the literature is scarce. Only two studies among academic staff, in which perfectionism subtypes were delineated differently, were found: One study conducted with university professors revealed positive relationships between maladaptive perfectionism and anxiety, depression, and hostility (Dunn, Whelton, & Sharpe, 2006). In contrast, another study found that adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism predicted lower research productivity among professors, implying that both dimensions were maladaptive. These contradictory results may arise due to the difficult nature of the academic workplace, which commonly involves criticism, scrutiny, and rejection; such could lead perfectionists (regardless of type) to reduce their exposure to these threats by lowering their research output (Sherry, Hewitt, Sherry, Flett, & Graham, 2010). Dunn et al. (2006) also noted that academic staff often perform demanding and detailed work subjected to critical peer scrutiny in largely difficult and unsupportive environments, which can exacerbate the maladaptive nature of perfectionism. It is therefore worth investigating whether adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism have differential predictions of occupational stress among a potential group of perfectionists in the university workplace. Moreover, adaptive behaviours in response to stressors have not been examined when studying relationships between perfectionism and stress among university employees; doing so could shed more light on the potentially adaptive nature of perfectionism in the context of occupational health.

This study employed strain, which is closely related to job burnout (Higgins, 1986), to indicate distress. Strain is the negative reaction that develops from the inability to cope effectively with various stressors (Osipow, 1998), which may manifest in various areas of life other than work, such as in psychological functioning, interpersonal relationships, and physical health. Numerous studies have established the positive association between perfectionism and burnout among employees (e.g., Childs & Stoeber, 2010). Compared with burnout, strain indicates less extreme points of distress, and offers a more comprehensive assessment (i.e., covering distress in vocational, psychological, interpersonal, and physical aspects), thus offering more valuable information for the purpose of occupational health interventions. To indicate eustress, vigor, one of strain's positive counterparts, was measured: This is the energy resource related to the motivational processes that initiate and sustain behaviour at work (Shirom, 2003). Vigor is thus pertinent to the dual process model of perfectionism since individuals with high PP are motivated to achieve success, whereas individuals with high NP are motivated to avoid failure (Slade & Owens, 1998).

Consistent with the Holistic Model of Stress, two studies have examined how perfectionism may predict burnout (distress) and vigor (eustress) among undergraduates (Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007) and various daytime employees (across public, retail, and law sectors; Childs & Stoeber, 2010). Again, different delineations of perfectionism were used in these studies. Overall, greater adaptive perfectionism was found to predict lower burnout and higher vigor, whereas increased maladaptive perfectionism predicted higher burnout and lower vigor. The main hypotheses of the present study built upon these findings: The aim was to examine how the dual process model of PP and NP may predict strain and vigor among daytime employees. The measurement of strain included vocational, psychological, interpersonal, and physical strain; thus facilitating a broader assessment of distress. This study also investigated the factor structure of perfectionism in a relatively homogenous group of daytime employees, hypothesising that two distinct factors of perfectionism would emerge, representing the dual distinction.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 156 employees (n_{male} = 64, n_{female} = 92) at a university, ranging from 20 to 67 years old (M = 35.00 years, SD = 9.30 years), with a reasonable balance between academic (n = 73) and administrative staff (n = 83). Duration of employment ranged from 2 weeks to 14 years (M = 2.7 years, SD = 2.8 years) and most were working full-time (87.1%). A sample size of N = 107 was needed to attain a power of .80 to detect a medium effect size on the main analyses.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

The 40-item Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale (PANPS; Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995) was used to assess participants' PP and NP levels (20 items each, shown in Table 1). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each item on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). PP and NP scores were obtained by summing the 20 item ratings; higher scores indicated higher levels of perfectionism. In the present sample, PP (α = .84) and NP (α = .88) showed high internal consistency.

2.2.2. Strain

The 40-item Personal Strain Questionnaire (PSQ) from the Occupational Stress Inventory-Revised (Osipow, 1998) was employed to measure strain. There are 4 subscales (10 items each), covering vocational (e.g., 'I am bored with my work.'), psychological (e.g., 'Lately, I am easily irritated.'), interpersonal (e.g., 'I often argue with friends.'), and physical strain (e.g., 'Lately, I have been tired.'). Participants rated how often each item was true on a Likert scale from 1 (*rarely or never true*) to 5 (*true most of the time*). Subscale scores were sums of the respective subscale item ratings; higher scores indicated greater strain. All four subscales demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in this study (α = .70–.89).

2.2.3. Vigor

Vigor was measured using the 12-item Shirom-Melamed Vigor Measure (SMVM; Shirom, 2005). It comprises 3 subscales: Physical