



## Brief Report

## Perfectionism: The good, the bad, and the creative

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## ABSTRACT

The influence of adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism on creativity was examined. Initially, six measures of creativity were administered, including creative self-perceptions, behavior, and performance measures. Adaptive perfectionism was weakly positively related to creativity, whereas maladaptive perfectionism was unrelated to creativity across five of the six measures. A follow-up study assessed whether initial findings could be generalized to an everyday problem-solving task. Results indicated that adaptive perfectionism was related to higher quality but not originality of solutions. Further, a curvilinear relationship in the shape of an inverted “U” occurred between adaptive perfectionism and four of eight creativity measures. Overall, adaptive perfectionism was consistently, albeit weakly, related to creativity across various types of measures, whereas maladaptive perfectionism was not related to creativity.

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## 1. Introduction

Perfectionism is credited with enhancing many different types of performance due to its positive influence on personal expectations, cognitions, self-esteem, attention, and effort (Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998; Stoeber & Eysenck, 2008). However, certain aspects of perfectionism have been blamed for dysfunctional feelings, cognitions, and behavior such as anxiety, depression, negative affect, and lower psychological well-being (Chang, 2006; Stoeber & Eysenck, 2008). As such, identification of the multidimensional nature of perfectionism – pioneered by Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) and Hewitt and Flett (1991) – has spurred interest in the differential effects of perfectionism dimensions.

One outcome variable that has received little attention in relation to perfectionism is creativity. Past studies have primarily focused on perfectionism as a unidimensional construct and its impact on gifted children and creative strivings (e.g., Gallucci, Middleton, & Kline, 2000; Joy & Hicks, 2004). In general, perfectionists were found to exhibit little desire to be creative. However, quantitative research is needed to assess the relationship between specific perfectionism dimensions and creativity.

## 1.1. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is defined as one's tendency to set excessively high personal standards (Frost et al., 1990). Hamachek (1978) differentiated between normal and neurotic perfectionism. Normal perfectionists set high personal standards but leave room for making reasonable mistakes and are critical of themselves but in a manner that drives their efforts to be exceptional. Conversely, neurotic perfectionists have little to no tolerance for mistakes and are overly critical of themselves. Neurotic perfectionists tend to procrastinate, and are more concerned with avoiding mistakes than striving for achievement (Frost et al., 1990; Hamachek, 1978). This differentiation was later dubbed adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism.

Adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism have been conceptualized as independent constructs (Suddarth & Slaney, 2001). It is therefore possible that people high on adaptive perfectionism are not necessarily low on maladaptive perfectionism and vice versa. That is, if the two constructs are independent, a person can exhibit both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. However, the substantive meaning of being high on both dimensions is yet to be addressed.

Many studies have shown that perfectionism is related to individual performance (Chang, 2006; Frost et al., 1990). This stream of research has also revealed that the multidimensional nature of perfectionism must be considered in regard to whether perfectionism will help or hinder one's performance. Adaptive perfectionists tend to excel, perhaps due to their high achievement expectations along with their tolerance for small mistakes (Chang, 2006; Frost et al.,

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1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). In contrast, maladaptive perfectionism tends to be negatively related to performance.

### 1.2. Empirical research on perfectionism and creativity

Although the relationship between perfectionism and achievement has been examined extensively, the influence of perfectionism on creativity has received little attention. Creativity occurs in the form of novel, useful, and socially valued ideas, actions, products, and services (Amabile, 1983). Creativity is strongly influenced by individual differences such as personality and motivational dispositions (Mumford & Gustafson, 1988). Factors that perpetuate creativity tend to entail one's capacity to look at the world from different perspectives, tolerate mistakes, and delve into the unknown.

To date, only a few studies have examined the relationship between perfectionism and creativity. Joy and Hicks (2004) found that perfectionism as a unitary construct was negatively related to the need to be different and openness to experience, two covariates of creativity. Gallucci et al. (2000) examined the direct relationship between perfectionism and creativity using the MPS measure of perfectionism and Khatena–Torrance Creative Perception Inventory, which includes two subscales (Khatena & Torrance, 1970). Perfectionism was negatively related to the subscale of creative striving with a moderate effect size. Surprisingly, perfectionism was not related to the other subscale. The authors suggested their findings may have occurred because perfectionism has a greater impact on creativity motivation than creative thinking style. Notably, Gallucci et al. did not discuss the positive correlation ( $r = .31$ ) between *personal strivings* (a sub-dimension of adaptive perfectionism) and the SAM. Thus, the study yielded hidden evidence that suggests higher personal strivings are positively related to creativity.

Further, these studies support the notion that perfectionism can be a hindrance to creativity, but did not consider the multidimensional nature of perfectionism that was already established. Specifically, the MPS administered by Gallucci et al. is a multidimensional assessment of perfectionism, so combining both dimensions into a composite single score conflates two independent dimensions that could have diverging effects on creativity (Suddarth & Slaney, 2001). Further, the MPS is weighted in favor of maladaptive perfectionism because there are three times as many maladaptive items on the MPS (Chang, 2006). Taken together, the problems associated with utilizing the MPS as a unidimensional assessment of perfectionism could explain why past work has predominantly found negative relationships between global perfectionism scores and creativity.

### 1.3. Hypotheses

Overall, studies examining the relationship between perfectionism dimensions and performance or creativity highlight the need to identify the unique influences of adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism on creative behavior. In doing so, it is expected that adaptive perfectionism will enhance creativity by motivating achievement-oriented desires to find unique approaches to problems, encourage openness to new experiences, and promote tolerance of ambiguity.

**Hypothesis 1.** Adaptive perfectionism will be positively related to creativity.

Conversely, it is expected that maladaptive perfectionism will inhibit creativity because it will evoke fear of failure, which makes individuals more likely to utilize tried and true approaches when solving problems.

**Hypothesis 2.** Maladaptive perfectionism will be negatively related to creativity.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants in the initial study were 334 males and 1002 females from a Midwestern university and a West Coast university. Participants were combined into a 1336 person pool. Participants ranged from 17–66 years-of-age, but the sample was primarily comprised of young adults ( $M = 22.9$  years,  $SD = 6.51$ ). In a follow-up study, a total of 364 (106 males, 258 females) undergraduate students from the same Midwestern university participated. Nearly half (46%) of the participants were between 19 and 20 years-of-age, 28.1% were 17–18 years-old, 14.3% were 21–22 years-old, 4.7% were 23–24 years-old, and 6.9% were 25 years-of-age or older. Students received extra credit in a pre-approved class of their choice for their participation.

### 2.2. Procedure

In the initial study participants completed a series of online surveys including three measures of creative behavior, two self-assessments of creative performance, a creativity task, and a commonly accepted perfectionism measure for assessing adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. A second study was conducted to examine the relationships between the perfectionism dimensions and creative performance on an everyday problem solving task. Importantly, in the follow-up study, the task required general, everyday, real-world creativity and addressed a different problem domain than the creativity task from the initial study. Participants in the second study were given a story problem. After reading the problem, participants were instructed to provide a “creative solution,” which was defined for them as being “original and high quality.” Next participants completed measures of adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, demographics and additional measures.

### 2.3. Perfectionism dimensions and sub-dimensions

A commonly accepted measure of perfectionism that has been utilized for over 20 years, the MPS (Frost et al., 1990), was administered and included 32-items using a five-point Likert-type survey (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*). The items comprising the adaptive perfectionism dimension showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ ). These items were categorized into the sub-dimensions of *personal standards* and *organization*. The items subsumed within the maladaptive perfectionism dimension yielded scores with high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Sub-dimensions of maladaptive perfectionism include *concern over mistakes*, *parental expectations*, *parental criticism*, and *doubt about mistakes*.

### 2.4. Creative behavior inventory (CBI)

The CBI is a 28 item, five-point frequency scale (1 = *Never did this*; 5 = *Did this more than 5 times*) assessing how often participants performed activities considered to be creative. For instance, one creative activity is “*painted an original picture*”. Survey items excluded activities done in fulfillment of an education/school requirement. Dollinger (2003) adapted this scale from a long version created by Hocevar (1979). Cronbach's alpha for the CBI was .93.

### 2.5. Creative domains questionnaire (CDQ-R)

The CDQ-R is a 21-item, 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Not at all creative*, 6 = *Extremely creative*) used to provide self-assessments

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