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A Short Empirical Note on Perfectionism and Flourishing

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Abstract

Flourishing describes an optimal state of mental health characterized by emotional, psychological, and social well-being. In a recent publication, Flett and Hewitt (2015) suggested that perfectionism prevents people from flourishing. Perfectionism, however, is a multidimensional personality characteristic, and its various dimensions show different relationships with indicators of subjective well-being. In the first empirical study of perfectionism and flourishing, we examined the relationships of multidimensional perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism) and self-reported flourishing in the past two weeks. Results from the sample of 388 university students revealed that only socially prescribed perfectionism showed a negative relationship with flourishing, whereas self-oriented perfectionism showed a positive relationship. These results were unchanged when positive and negative affect were controlled statistically. Our findings indicate that not all dimensions of perfectionism undermine flourishing and that it is important to differentiate perfectionistic strivings and concerns when regarding the perfectionism–flourishing relationship.

Keywords: perfectionism; flourishing; subjective well-being; positive affect; negative affect

1. Introduction

Introduced by Keyes (2002), flourishing is an important concept in research on mental health, describing an optimal state that goes beyond satisfaction with life and a positive–negative affect balance (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Instead, flourishing is a combination of emotional, psychological, and social well-being that includes happiness, meaning, engagement, purpose in life, mastery, and personal growth, as well as positive social relations entailing engaging with others and feeling related to others (Diener et al., 2010; Huppert & So, 2013; Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., in press). A recent publication titled "Managing perfectionism and the excessive striving that undermines flourishing" by two leading perfectionism researchers has suggested that perfectionism undermines flourishing and stands in the way of emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Flett & Hewitt, 2015). Their position presents a challenge for theory and research that has suggested that perfectionism is not always associated with psychological maladjustment, but can be associated with healthy psychological functioning (e.g., Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). How can

perfectionism undermine flourishing, as suggested by Flett and Hewitt (2015), and yet at the same time be associated with healthy psychological functioning? This paradox is the subject of this article.

1.1. Multidimensional perfectionism and subjective well-being

A possible answer to this question comes from the observation that perfectionism is multidimensional (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Asbhy, 2001) and that its various dimensions show different associations with psychological maladjustment versus healthy psychological functioning. Research has shown that dimensions reflecting perfectionistic concerns are consistently associated with psychological maladjustment, whereas dimensions reflecting perfectionistic strivings are often associated with healthy psychological functioning (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993), particularly when the overlap between the different dimensions is controlled statistically (for a review, see Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

One of the most influential and widely researched models of perfectionism is Hewitt and Flett's (1991) which differentiates three dimensions of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are personally important. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important to others. Socially prescribed perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect, and that others will be highly critical of them if they fail to meet these expectations.

Whereas other-oriented perfectionism is now regarded as a unique form different from perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings (Stoeber, 2014), research comparing Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model with other perfectionism models concurs that socially prescribed perfectionism is a dimension indicative of perfectionistic concerns, and self-oriented perfectionism is a dimension indicative of perfectionistic strivings (Frost et al., 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Consequently, one would expect socially prescribed perfectionism to show negative relationships with indicators of subjective well-being, and self-oriented perfectionism to show positive relationships.

Research findings clearly support this assertion for socially prescribed perfectionism which has consistently shown negative relationships with satisfaction with life (and sometimes negative correlations with positive affect) and positive relationships with negative affect (e.g.,

Molnar, Reker, Culp, Sadava, & DeCourville, 2006; Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). For self-oriented perfectionism, the findings are more complex. This is because self-oriented perfectionism often shows positive relationships with both positive and negative affect, and may fail to show positive relationships with satisfaction with life when the overlap with socially prescribed perfectionism is not controlled statistically (e.g., Damian, Stoeber, Negru, & Băban, 2014; Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Once this statistical overlap is controlled, self-oriented perfectionism ceases to show a positive relationship with negative affect and, instead, shows a positive relationship with positive affect only and also with life satisfaction (e.g., Damian et al., 2014; Gaudreau & Verner-Filion, 2012).

1.2. The present study

The present study is the first empirical research on perfectionism and flourishing. To investigate whether perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings show different relationships with flourishing, we used unpublished data in combination with previously published data from Stoeber and Corr (2015).[1] As concerns the three dimensions of Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model, we regarded self-oriented perfectionism as an indicator of perfectionistic strivings and socially prescribed perfectionism as an indicator of perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). To examine whether the relationships were unique for flourishing, we controlled for positive and (the absence of) negative affect as indicators of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1999).

Even though this was the first study of perfectionism and flourishing, some expectations could be formulated based on research on perfectionism and subjective well-being. Socially prescribed perfectionism was expected to show a negative relationship with flourishing. Self-oriented perfectionism was not. On the contrary, based on previous research, a positive relationship between self-oriented perfectionism and flourishing was expected, particularly when the overlap with socially prescribed perfectionism was controlled statistically. As regards other-oriented perfectionism, we had no particular expectations because this dimension has shown no clear relationships with subjective well-being (cf. Stoeber, 2014).

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[1]Stoeber and Corr's article examined perfectionism, reinforcement sensitivity, and positive and negative affect, but did not examine flourishing.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 388 students (73 men, 312 women, 1 nondisclosed) at the University of Kent was recruited via the School of Psychology's Research Participation Scheme. Mean age of students was 19.8 years (*SD* = 4.0). Students volunteered to participate for a £50 raffle (~US $78) or extra course credit and completed all measures online using the School's Qualtrics® platform, which required to respond to all questions to prevent missing data. The study was approved by the relevant ethics committee and followed the British Psychological Society's (2009) code of ethics and conduct.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionism

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 2004) was used to measure self-oriented perfectionism (15 items; e.g., "I demand nothing less than perfection of myself"), other-oriented perfectionism (15 items; "If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly"), and socially prescribed perfectionism (15 items; "People expect nothing less than perfection from me"). Items were presented with the MPS's standard instruction ("Listed below are a number of statements concerning personal characteristics and traits…"), and participants responded on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.2. Flourishing

The 8-item Flourishing Scale (Diener et al, 2010) was used to measure key aspects of flourishing (e.g., "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life," "My social relationships are supportive and rewarding"). Because flourishing is conceptualized as a state (Keyes, 2002) and we were interested in participants' current level of flourishing, items were presented in the past tense (e.g., "I led a purposeful and meaningful life," "My social relationships were supportive and rewarding"), and participants indicated to what extent they had felt this way during the past two weeks using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

2.2.3. Positive and negative affect

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to measure positive affect (10 item; e.g., "enthusiastic," "proud") and negative affect (10 items; "distressed," "ashamed") employing the same timeframe as for flourishing. Participants indicated to what extent they had felt each emotion during the past two weeks using a scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

2.3. Data screening

Because multivariate outliers distort the results of correlation and regression analyses, two participants were excluded showing a Mahalanobis distance larger than the critical value of $\chi^2(6) = 22.46$, $p < .001$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). With this, the final sample comprised 386 participants. Next, we examined whether the variance–covariance matrices of male and female participants differed by computing a Box's *M* test with gender as between-participants factor. The test was nonsignificant ($p = .38$), so analyses were collapsed across gender. Finally, the reliability of the measures was examined, and all showed satisfactory Cronbach's alphas $\geq .78$ (Table 1).

3. Results

3.1. Bivariate correlations

First, bivariate correlations were examined (Table 1). Only socially prescribed perfectionism showed a negative correlation with flourishing, whereas self-oriented perfectionism showed a positive correlation. Furthermore, socially prescribed perfectionism showed a negative correlation with positive affect and a positive correlation with negative affect. In contrast, self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism showed positive correlations with both negative and positive affect. Finally, flourishing showed a positive correlation with positive affect and a negative correlation with negative affect.

3.2. Multiple regressions

Next, we conducted two multiple regressions. In Regression 1, the three perfectionism dimensions were entered simultaneously to predict flourishing. In Regression 2, a hierarchical regression analysis comprising two steps was employed to examine whether perfectionism explained variance in flourishing beyond positive and negative affect. In Step 1, positive and negative affect were entered simultaneously; and in Step 2, the three perfectionism dimensions were added as predictors (again entered simultaneously). Table 2 shows the results.

Regression 1 showed that perfectionism explained 17.8% of variance in flourishing. The perfectionism dimensions showed the same relationships as the bivariate correlations: Socially prescribed perfectionism showed a negative regression coefficient, whereas self-oriented perfectionism showed a positive coefficient. Regression 2 showed that positive and negative affect explained 46.2% variance in flourishing (Step 1) with positive affect showing a positive and negative affect a negative regression coefficient. Perfectionism explained a further 4.3% in

flourishing (Step 2). What is more, self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism showed the same significant regression coefficients as in Regression 1 when affect was not taken into account: socially prescribed perfectionism a negative coefficient, and self-oriented perfectionism a positive coefficient.

4. Discussion

4.1. The present findings

Presenting the first empirical research on perfectionism and flourishing, the findings of this study confirm Flett and Hewitt's (2015) suggestion that perfectionism can undermine flourishing and stand in the way of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Our findings, however, show that it is not perfectionistic strivings (indicated by self-oriented perfectionism) that undermine flourishing, but perfectionistic concerns (indicated by socially prescribed perfectionism). On the contrary, people who believe that striving for perfection and being perfect are personally important seem to feel that their life is more fulfilled, purposeful, and socially related than people who do not hold such beliefs. Furthermore, the present findings of self-oriented perfectionism showing a positive relationship with flourishing, and socially prescribed perfectionism showing a negative relationship, suggest that some perfectionists (particularly those high in self-oriented and low in socially prescribed perfectionism) experience high levels of flourishing whereas others (particularly those high in socially prescribed and low in self-oriented perfectionism) experience low levels of flourishing (cf. Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010). Finally, the present finding that perfectionism explained a substantial percentage of variance in flourishing (and still explained significant variance after the effects of positive and negative affect were taken into account) indicates that perfectionism itself is an important factor explaining individual differences in flourishing (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., in press).

4.2. Limitations and future studies

The present study has a number of limitations. First, the sample was predominantly female (81%), and future studies should replicate the findings with samples that have a greater proportion of males. Second, the study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. Consequently, the regression analyses indicating that perfectionism predicted flourishing should not be interpreted in a causal or temporal fashion. Third, our study focused on Hewitt and Flett's (1991) multidimensional model of perfectionism. Although this is one of the most widely-used models of perfectionism, future studies may profit from extending the present research to other multidimensional models (e.g., Frost et al., 1990; Slaney et al., 2001) and other indicators of

perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). It would also be useful to examine a more representative sample of the general population including older as well as younger participants.

4.3. Conclusions

This is the first empirical study to explore the relations between perfectionism and flourishing. The results are clear and challenge the general claim made by Flett and Hewitt (2015) that perfectionism in general is negatively related to flourishing. Our results show that self-oriented perfectionism (a form of perfectionistic strivings) is positively related to flourishing, but socially prescribed perfectionism (a form of perfectionistic concerns) is negatively related. These results were the same in the bivariate correlations and regression analyses (controlling for positive and negative affect) which gives us confidence in their robustness. Further research is warranted, if only to challenge the view that all forms of perfectionism are detrimental to flourishing. This is important because attempts to "manage" perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2015) may undermine flourishing in some perfectionists.

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Table 1

Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Perfectionism						
1. Self-oriented perfectionism						
2. Other-oriented perfectionism	.46***					
3. Socially prescribed perfectionism	.47***	.30***				
4. Flourishing	.19***	.10	–.24***			
Affect						
5. Positive affect	.14**	.12*	–.14**	.62***		
6. Negative affect	.16**	.13*	.43***	–.32***	–.07	
M	4.63	3.82	3.80	4.84	3.16	2.35
SD	1.02	0.72	0.85	1.06	0.74	0.77
Cronbach's alpha	.91	.78	.78	.89	.86	.86

Note. $N = 386$. Variables were computed by averaging item responses. Flourishing and affect were measured with a past-two-weeks' timeframe.

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 2

Summary of Multiple Regressions Predicting Flourishing

DV = Flourishing	ΔR^2	β
Regression 1	.178***	
Self-oriented perfectionism		.37***
Other-oriented perfectionism		.05
Socially prescribed perfectionism		–.43***
Regression 2		
Step 1: Affect	.462***	
Positive affect		.60***
Negative affect		–.27***
Step 2: Perfectionism	.043***	
Self-oriented perfectionism		.23***
Other-oriented perfectionism		.01
Socially prescribed perfectionism		–.17***

Note. N = 386. DV = dependent variable. β = standardized regression coefficient. Flourishing and affect: see Table 1.

***$p < .001$.