

Perfectionism and Lifestyle: Personality Differences among Adaptive Perfectionists, Maladaptive Perfectionists, and Nonperfectionists

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Abstract

To investigate the relationship between perfectionism and personality structure or lifestyle, the authors administered measures of multidimensional perfectionism (Almost Perfect Scale—Revised; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) and broad lifestyle themes (BASIS-A Inventory; Wheeler, Kern, & Curlette, 1993) to 181 undergraduate students. The authors found significant differences among the apparently characteristic lifestyles of adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists. The results appear conceptually consistent with earlier research that differentiated maladaptive perfectionists from adaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists by a tendency toward neurotic coping strategies associated with greater dysfunction and distress.

Adler (cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1991) described striving for perfection as imperative of the human experience, a motive that finds expression in both normal and neurotic forms. Hamachek (1978) suggested that normal or adaptive perfectionists derive satisfaction from achievements born of intense efforts but tolerate imperfection without resorting to the harsh self-criticism characteristic of neurotic or maladaptive perfectionists. Additionally, Hamachek described maladaptive or "neurotic perfectionists" as persons who never seem to self-monitor achievement as good enough and always believe that they should do better (p. 27).

Recently, researchers have done much to delineate the multidimensional nature of perfectionism (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Slaney & Johnson, 1992). Perfectionists may be distinguished from nonperfectionists on the basis of the very high standards for personal performance they endorse, while adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists may be differentiated by the degree of discrepancy they perceive between their standards and their actual performance (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). Using principal components factor analysis, Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, and Neubauer (1993) identified a two-factor structure, one representing a maladaptive evaluation and the other a positive striving. The maladaptive factor was significantly related to depression and negative affect. Additional negative outcomes associated with maladaptive

perfectionism include depression and anxiety (Burns, 1980; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), obsessive-compulsive disorders (Broday, 1989), suicide (Blatt, 1995), and low self-esteem and depression in college students (Ashby & Rice, 2002; Preusser, Rice, & Ashby, 1994).

Despite growing support for Adler's original conceptualization, relatively few studies have investigated the relationship between perfectionism and underlying personality structure. Maladaptive perfectionists appear to experience significantly greater feelings of inferiority (Ashby & Kottman, 1996) and neurotic narcissism (Watson, Varnell, & Morris, 1999) than do adaptive perfectionists. Ashby et al. (1999) found significant differences among the personality priorities of adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists. An investigation of the relationship of multidimensional perfectionism and personality styles in middle school children employed a measure of Adlerian lifestyles and obtained significant differences among the ways these groups approach the basic tasks of living (LoCicero, Ashby, & Kern, 2000). Ashby, Kottman, and Stoltz (2006) found that perfectionists, in general, attempt to strive for high personal standards indicated by high Achieving and Outdoing personality priority scale scores. However, the results also indicate a difference between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists. The maladaptive perfectionists scored high in Outdoing and Detaching scales, indicating that these individuals organize their lives consistently through measuring and attempting to outdo others.

The purpose of the current study was to replicate and extend earlier research by examining the relationship between multidimensional perfectionism and a broad spectrum of personality priorities or lifestyle themes. We hypothesized that significant differences in lifestyle themes would be obtained for adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists.

Method

Participants. A total of 181 students at a university in the northeastern United States participated in the study. Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses. The sample consisted of 134 women and 47 men, with a mean age of 24 (range 18–48). The ethnicity make up of the sample was 83% White, 14% African American, and less than 1% Asian American, Latino/Hispanic, and other respectively.

Materials. The Almost Perfect Scale–Revised (Slaney et al., 2001) is a 23-item inventory with three subscales measuring dimensions of perfectionism. The subscales include Standards (7 items measuring personal standards), Order (4 items measuring organization and the need for order), and Discrepancy (12 items measuring discomfort/distress related to the discrepancy

between a person's performance and his or her personal standards). Slaney, Rice, and Ashby (2002) described a series of confirmatory factor analyses that supported the structure and independence of the scales. In separate analyses of samples of 600 and 260, factor loadings for the items ranged from .49 to .86 in the first sample and .50 to .86 in the second sample. Slaney et al. also provided support for the convergent and divergent validity of the subscales. The authors report Chronbach's coefficient alphas for Standards (.85), Discrepancy (.92), and Order (.68). As in previous studies (e.g., Ashby et al., 2006) only the Standards and Discrepancy Scores were used in this study. Internal consistency reliabilities for the scales in this sample were .72 (Standards) and .88 (Discrepancy).

The BASIS-A Inventory (Wheeler, Kern, & Curlette, 1993) measures five lifestyle themes. The Belonging/Social Interest (BSI) scale measures the person's sense of community involvement. The Going Along (GA) scale measures one's need to understand and adhere to social rules. The Taking Charge (TC) scale measures one's comfort level of directing situations and others. The Wanting Recognition (WR) scale measures the importance one places on opinions of others. The Being Cautious (BC) scale measures how trusting one is in interpersonal relationships (Eckstein & Kern, 2002). Additionally, five scales help to expand and interpret the five main scales listed previously. These scales are Harshness, Entitlement, Liked by All, Perfectionism, and Softness. A common sentence stem is used for all 65 questions: "When I was a child, I . . ." with a response set of strongly disagree, disagree, indifferent, agree, and strongly agree. The instrument allows the participant to reflect on his or her perceptions of early life events in a manner consistent with the theory of Individual Psychology.

The reported coefficient alpha reliabilities for the five main scales range from .82 to .87 and have been cross-validated with a sample after a third factor analysis was completed. For this study, the coefficients alpha for the five scales were .80 (BSI), .80 (GA), .89 (TC), .84 (WR), and .89 (BC). Test-retest reliabilities for the five scales range from .66 to .87, which reflect a moderate level of stability. Expert judges were used to determine the representativeness of the items, developing content validity for the factors. One exploratory and two confirmatory factor analyses support the factor structure of the five major scales of the instrument. Validation of the instrument is supported by over 30 major research studies (Curlette, Wheeler, & Kern, 1997).

Procedure. Participants in the study were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses. Participation was voluntary, and participants were awarded extra class credit for their participation. After informed consent review, each participant completed the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001) and the BASIS-A Inventory (Wheeler et al., 1993). No further procedures were required of the participants.

Results

Participants in the study were classified as adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists using the cluster analysis recommendations of Hair, Anderson, Tathan, and Black (1995) and used by previous researchers (e.g., Parker, 1997; Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000). Using Ward's linkage method and squared Euclidian distance measure, APS-R Standards and Discrepancy subscale scores were standardized and submitted to an initial hierarchical cluster analysis. Changes in agglomeration coefficients offered support for both a three-cluster solution and four-cluster solution. Based on theoretical work (e.g., Hamachek, 1978) and previous perfectionism research using clusters (e.g., Rice & Mirzadeh), a three-cluster solution (representing groups of maladaptive perfectionists, adaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists) was used. Cluster centroids derived from the hierarchical cluster analysis were used in a subsequent nonhierarchical k-means cluster analysis. Convergence on the final clusters was achieved after 4 iterations and yielded 67 participants in the first cluster, 79 participants in the second cluster, and 35 participants in the third cluster. Average APS-R subscale scores for these clusters appear in Table 1.

One-way ANOVAs revealed significant differences between clusters on the Standards and Discrepancy APS-R scales ($p < .0001$). Results from Tukey pairwise comparisons revealed results consistent with other studies (e.g., Martin et al., 2001) and facilitated the labeling of the clusters. For example, participants in Clusters 2 and 3 were not significantly different on Standards, though both had significantly higher scores than those in Cluster 1. However, Cluster 3 had significantly higher Discrepancy scores than

Table 1
Average APS-R Subscale Scores by Perfectionism Cluster

Cluster	Standards	Discrepancy
1. Nonperfectionists		
<i>M</i>	34.43	41.28
<i>SD</i>	3.75	11.18
2. Adaptive Perfectionists		
<i>M</i>	44.08	35.33
<i>SD</i>	2.83	8.65
3. Maladaptive Perfectionists		
<i>M</i>	43.11	62.23
<i>SD</i>	3.77	9.41

Table 2
Average BASIS-A Inventory Scores by Perfectionism Cluster

BASIS-A Inventory Scale	Nonperfectionism		Adaptive Perfectionism		Maladaptive Perfectionism	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Belonging/Social Interest	33.02	(6.76)	33.61	(6.12)	33.00	(6.06)
Going Along	30.41	(5.72)	30.61	(5.05)	28.85	(5.42)
Taking Charge	19.00*	(6.16)	18.49*	(5.61)	23.74†	(7.02)
Wanting Recognition	41.30*	(6.82)	42.60	(5.22)	44.62†	(5.95)
Being Cautious	17.14	(7.23)	15.84*	(6.37)	19.29†	(8.13)
Harshness	14.19	(2.09)	14.17	(1.82)	14.27	(2.18)
Entitlement	15.67*	(5.01)	15.09*	(4.48)	18.21†	(5.32)
Liked by All	22.31*	(4.26)	23.27	(3.31)	24.15†	(3.56)
Striving for Perfection	19.75	(2.76)	20.01	(2.41)	19.97	(3.42)
Softness	13.56*	(2.85)	13.05*	(2.64)	14.85†	(3.05)

Note. Scores with different notations (*, †) indicate significant within-row differences between or among clusters according to Tukey post hoc comparisons ($p < .05$). For example, for the row, Wanting Recognition, is interpreted as follows: The mean scores for nonperfectionists and maladaptive perfectionists were significantly different; however, other comparisons did not yield significant differences at the .05 level.

Cluster 2. Consequently, descriptors of Cluster 1 appeared to be theoretically consistent with nonperfectionism (lower standards scores). Participants in Cluster 2 seemed consistent with adaptive perfectionism (high standards with low discrepancy). Cluster 3 appeared to be consistent with maladaptive perfectionism (high standards with high discrepancy).

After perfectionism clusters were identified, data were analyzed using a one-way MANOVA. The between-subjects factor was perfectionism (adaptive perfectionist, maladaptive perfectionist, and nonperfectionist). The results of the MANOVA indicated significant differences between the clusters of perfectionists on the BASIS-A Inventory scales ($F = 2.01, p < .005$). Tukey pairwise comparisons revealed a number of significant differences between perfectionism clusters. Maladaptive perfectionists had significantly higher Taking Charge scores than both adaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists ($d = 0.82, d = 0.74$, respectively) and higher Entitlement scores than both adaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists ($d = 0.63, d = 0.51$, respectively). Maladaptive perfectionists also had significantly higher Wanting Recognition scores than nonperfectionists ($d = 0.55$). Finally, maladaptive perfectionists had significantly higher Being Cautious ($d = 0.48$), Liked by All ($d = 0.49$), and Softness ($d = 0.63$) scores than adaptive perfectionists. There were no significant differences between clusters on the other BASIS-A Inventory scales. Average BASIS-A Inventory scale scores by perfectionism cluster appear in Table 2. With the exception of the maladaptive perfectionists' Taking Charge average score, which was in the "High" Range, all of the BASIS-A Inventory scale scores for the perfectionism clusters were in the average range.

Discussion

The results of the study support our hypothesis and are conceptually consistent with the growing literature regarding multidimensional perfectionism. For instance, the significant differences indicated between the three groups on the Taking Charge and Entitlement scales specifically support differences in the dimensions of perfectionism. Adaptive perfectionists' lower scores on Taking Charge and Entitlement suggest that these individuals work well in environments that require cooperation. These individuals may not feel compelled to take on leadership positions and may be more prone to seek cooperative relationships. In contrast, Kern, Edwards, and Flowers's study (as cited in Curlette et al., 1997) found that teachers higher on the Taking Charge scale viewed students as more competitive. Thus, maladaptive perfectionists, with relatively higher Taking Charge scores in this study, may view the environment as competitive and approach relationships with a more aggressive

demeanor. With a tendency to view relationships as competitive, maladaptive perfectionists may be more likely to react negatively to perceived mistakes in the environment. Additionally, higher scores in Entitlement also indicate that maladaptive perfectionists may approach the environment with an attitude that things must go as planned. These individuals may approach work with an assertive nature, believing that they must achieve goals in their own way. The results indicate that maladaptive perfectionists may perceive a need to control the environment and develop negative attitudes when events do not match their plans.

The results of this study also suggest that maladaptive perfectionists were higher in Wanting Recognition scores than nonperfectionists. These higher scores may indicate that maladaptive perfectionists are more likely than nonperfectionists to seek positive feedback from the environment and to attempt to gain approval from others. Given this tendency, when maladaptive perfectionists are faced with an apparent discrepancy between results and expectations (i.e., an imperfection), they may become discouraged and seek alternate ways to gain acceptance.

Finally, results indicated that maladaptive perfectionists scored higher on the Being Cautious, Liked by All, and Softness scales than adaptive perfectionists. A higher score on the Being Cautious scale suggests that one is prone to perceiving the environment as unpredictable, unfair, or dangerous. This tendency to perceive the world in this way may cause maladaptive perfectionists to develop a stance of mistrust toward others, resulting in a negative view of results that are unexpected. The observed higher scores on the Liked by All scale may suggest the relative importance the maladaptive perfectionist places on being liked and accepted by others. This may make the maladaptive individual agreeable in social settings until one indicates disagreement, which may be a cue for the maladaptive perfectionist to view the results as inferior or negative. This coupled with the high Being Cautious score may lead to a general heightened sensitivity for environmental feedback. The softness scale is one that indicates a more positive outlook toward the environment and future. This scale is specifically noted for having the highest correlations with stress coping (Kern, Gfroerer, Summers, Curlette, & Matheny, 1996). This result may be beneficial to the maladaptive perfectionist, as coping with life's stressors is an important aspect of overall adjustment. This ability to be positive may also overshadow the negative aspects experienced in times of perceived failure. Having this rosy view of the future may cause one to dismiss the negative experiences of past endeavors with little regard for personality attributes that may have helped cause the negative experience.

Of special interest in the results of the study was the lack of differences in the Striving for Perfection Scale from the BASIS-A Inventory among the three

groups. The scale is reported to measure a perception of high expectations of self and others and high standards for performance. The scale suggests that individuals high in this attribute may come from families that value high achievement (Kern, Wheeler, & Curlette, 1997). The lack of difference is interesting in that the APS-R and the BASIS-A Inventory Striving for Perfection scale appear to be measuring different aspects of Adler's striving for perfection concept. Further study into this area may reveal helpful differences in the internal views of this striving.

Considering the scores as a profile may assist in further defining the lifestyle of maladaptive perfectionists from adaptive perfectionists and non-perfectionists. The higher scores on the Softness scale may reflect an attempt to deflect the hurtful, negative appraisal of one's experience, while the Entitlement and Taking Charge scores suggest a somewhat neurotic strategy to mitigate the distress of perceived deficiency that is consistent with previous research (e.g., Ashby & Kottman, 1996; Watson et al., 1999). Similarly, higher scores on Wanting Recognition and the Liked by All scales suggest a tendency to seek approval and validation from others in order to counter the discrepancy maladaptive perfectionists seem to perceive characteristically. Adding to this is a generalized perception that the world is unpredictable, as indicated by the Being Cautious scales, augmenting the maladaptive perfectionists' ideas of others discovering the discrepancies between performance and results.

The differences in lifestyles for adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists obtained in this study indicate that members of these groups take different approaches to basic life tasks and may entail important considerations for clinicians and educators working with maladaptively perfectionistic individuals. Therapy clients would likely benefit from efforts aimed at increasing positive, constructive approaches to striving for perfection and overcoming feelings of inferiority. Additionally, maladaptive perfectionistic clients may benefit from understanding the conflicting nature of lifestyle attributes such as needing to be in a leadership role yet desiring to be held in esteem by others. These types of conflicting attributes may begin to help the client understand sources of stress and the formation of defensive attitudes that diminish productive socially interested relationships. Educators might assist students they identify as unreasonably self-critical by offering alternative evaluation processes that focus on what was learned in addition to or in place of test scores. Knowing the maladaptive perfectionist's focus on outcome will assist educators in refocusing the student on the process of learning.

These findings demonstrate strong support for the multidimensional aspects of perfectionism and differing lifestyle attributes among the three groups identified in the study. The results suggest that specific therapeutic

interventions may be appropriate for maladaptive perfectionists. While additional research is clearly needed, this study supports Adler's original conceptualization of a differential relationship between multidimensional perfectionism and broadly characteristic personality styles.

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