

# Multidimensional Perfectionism and Personality Profiles

Jeffrey S. Ashby, Terry Kottman, and Kevin B. Stoltz

## Abstract

This study was designed to investigate the relationship between perfectionism and Adlerian personality priorities. A MANOVA including the subscales of the Langenfeld Inventory of Personality Priority (Langenfeld & Main, 1983) revealed significant differences between persons classified as perfectionists and nonperfectionists. Follow-up tests showed that the 50 perfectionists scored significantly higher than 173 nonperfectionists on Achieving and Outdoing. A second MANOVA revealed personality priority differences between the 21 persons classified as adaptive perfectionists and the 29 maladaptive perfectionists. Follow-up tests showed that maladaptive perfectionists scored significantly higher than adaptive perfectionists on Outdoing and Detaching.

Over the past several years, an increasing number of researchers have explored the construct of perfectionism (e.g., Slaney & Ashby, 1996) and its relationship to personality factors (Ashby & Kottman, 1996), career choice (Slaney, Ashby, & Trippi, 1995), and self-esteem (Preusser, Rice, & Ashby, 1994; Rice, Ashby, & Preusser, 1996). Much of the earlier research (Hewett & Flett, 1991; Hewett, Mittelstaedt, & Flett, 1990) and the anecdotal, clinical literature on perfectionism (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Burns, 1980; Hamachek, 1978; Piro, 1986) stemmed from the view that perfectionism is always a negative trait. These early studies and anecdotal descriptions used a definition suggesting that perfectionists have excessively high personal standards. Slaney et al. (1995) surveyed the literature on perfectionism and noted that this definition was based on a nonrepresentative sample of clients and on "the thoughts and impressions of theorists and clinicians who saw perfectionism as problematic and pathological" (p. 193). Slaney and Ashby (1996), in examining the studies on perfectionism, found that the currently available data did not support this definition—that having high personal standards and being organized or orderly were not necessarily negative traits and were not particularly associated with problems in interpersonal relationships or the tendency to procrastinate.

Based in part on a qualitative study of a criterion group of perfectionists who reported many positive aspects of perfectionism (Slaney & Ashby, 1996),

Slaney and his colleagues (Slaney et al., 1995; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) developed the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised to measure perfectionism from a multidimensional perspective. Scores can be used to make a distinction between the positive qualities of perfectionism and the negative qualities of perfectionism. Researchers (e.g., Rice et al., 1996) have been able to divide perfectionists into (a) adaptive perfectionists, who seem to manifest the positive qualities, and (b) maladaptive perfectionists, who seem to manifest the negative qualities of perfectionism.

Despite the growing body of research related to perfectionism, very few researchers have explored the underlying personality structures involved in perfectionism. In a search of the literature, we found only one published article by Ashby and Kottman (1996) based on empirical research related to underlying personality structures from a theoretical perspective. To add to the understanding, we designed the current study to investigate (a) the relationship between perfectionism and personality priorities and (b) the differential relationship between maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism and the five personality priorities posited in Individual Psychology. Adlerian psychologists believe that understanding a client's lifestyle and helping the client understand his or her lifestyle is the key to psychotherapy (Adler, 1931/1958; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Kefir (1981) suggested that lifestyle is "the apperceptive ways one looks at oneself and the external world, and how one moves behaviorally through life toward an idealized goal of superiority" (p. 402). Lifestyle characterizes everything that the client thinks, feels, and does.

Clinicians who adhere to the theory of Individual Psychology have different methods of gathering information and gaining insight into a client's lifestyle (Eckstein & Baruth, 1996; Shulman & Mosak, 1988). One approach to understanding lifestyle uses the concept of personality priorities (Kefir, 1971, 1981; Langenfeld & Main, 1983; Pew, 1974).

Kefir (1971, 1981) originally posited the idea of personality priorities as avoidance strategies, methods of moving away from a perceived traumatic event (an impasse) and achieving a sense of mastery over chaos and fear. Her list of personality priorities included the controller, the pleaser, the morally superior, and the avoider (Kefir, 1981).

Based on their observation that many clinicians were using the theoretical construct of personality priorities in their work with clients, Langenfeld and Main (1983) developed the Langenfeld Inventory of Personality Priorities. These researchers wished to investigate the validity of the theoretical construct of personality priorities. The factor analysis of the data collected in their study yielded five factors (or priorities), rather than the four factors predicted by Kefir and other authors. These factors were Pleasing, Achieving, Outdoing, Detaching, and Avoiding. According to this analysis, the goal of individuals whose primary personality priority is Pleasing is to "make others

happy" (Langenfeld & Main, 1983, p. 47). Individuals whose primary personality priorities are both Achieving and Outdoing strive for superiority. Achieving individuals do their striving through personally satisfying accomplishments, and Outdoing individuals do their striving through outdoing others. The goal of individuals whose primary personality priority is Detaching is gaining control of themselves. Avoiding individuals try to avoid perceived threats of emotional discomfort and stressful situations.

Subsequent researchers have explored the utility of the construct of personality priorities related to wellness (Britzman & Main, 1990) and marital adjustment (Evans & Bozarth, 1986; Main & Oliver, 1988). Recently, researchers using Langenfeld and Main's instrument (Ashby, Kottman, & Rice, 1998; Kottman, Ashby, Schoen, Honsell, & LoCicero, 1998) reported significant differences between groups of individuals with specific personality priorities in several distinct areas (self-esteem, social interest, locus of control, dysfunctional attitudes) that supported the theoretical descriptions of the personality priority types.

The purpose of the current study was to address the questions of whether perfectionists differ significantly from nonperfectionists on a measure of personality priorities and whether adaptive perfectionists differ significantly from maladaptive perfectionists on a measure of personality priorities.

## **Method**

*Participants.* Two hundred and twenty three students at a midsized, Midwestern university participated in the study. Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses. This sample consisted of 69% women and 31% men, most of whom (94%) were White, with a mean age of 22 years (range 17–56 years).

*Procedures.* Participants completed a demographic sheet and several instruments. The instruments included the Almost Perfect Scale–Revised (Slaney et al., 2001) and the Langenfeld Inventory of Personality Priorities (Langenfeld & Main, 1983). All participants volunteered, and some received extra credit for their participation.

*Inventories.* 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. (2002) also provided support for the convergent and divergent validity of the subscales. They reported Chronbach's coefficient alphas for Standards (.85), Discrepancy (.92), and Order (.68). Internal consistency reliabilities for our sample were .85 (Standards), .93 (Discrepancy), and .86 (Order).

The Langenfeld Inventory of Personality Priorities (Langenfeld & Main, 1983) was designed to measure an individual's personality priorities. The scale has 75 total items and five 15 item subscales. The subscales include Pleasing, Achieving, Outdoing, Detaching, and Avoiding. Langenfeld and Main (1983) described a factor analysis of 800 participants that supported the factor structure, content validity for the scales, and a 2-week test-retest reliability of .94. Internal consistency reliabilities for our sample were .81 (Achieving), .75 (Outdoing), .69 (Pleasing), .84 (Avoiding), and .74 (Detaching).

## **Results**

Perfectionism is generally operationalized as the holding of high personal standards (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Slaney & Ashby, 1996). As in earlier studies (Ashby & Kottman, 1996; Ashby, LoCicero, Kottman, Schoen, & Honsell, 1998), perfectionists were identified as those participants whose scores on the Standards subscales of the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised fell in the top third of the sample (above the 67th percentile).

Consistent with the earlier studies, the researchers classified perfectionists, participants with high standards, as either adaptive or maladaptive perfectionists. Adaptive perfectionists were distinguished from maladaptive perfectionists using a median split on the Discrepancy subscale (median = 42). Maladaptive perfectionists were operationalized as persons with high personal standards and a high distress resulting from the discrepancy between their personal standards and their performance. Adaptive perfectionists were operationalized as persons with high personal standards and low distress resulting from the discrepancy between their personal standards and their performance.

Data were initially analyzed using a one-way MANOVA. The between-subjects factor was Perfectionism. The dependent variables were the Achieving, Outdoing, Pleasing, Avoiding, and Detaching subscales of the personality profiles inventory. The multivariate analysis followed the recommendations of Huberty and Morris (1989), who suggested that, when addressing potential underlying constructs, an initial significant multivariate main effect be followed by univariate follow-up tests and accompanied by a report of inter-correlations among the variables. Several of the measures were statistically significantly correlated. Correlations for all of the measures are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
 Correlations for the Langenfeld Inventory of Personality Priorities and the Almost Perfect Scale—Revised

	Order	Standards	Discrepancy	Achieving	Outdoing	Pleasing	Avoiding
Standards	.40**						
Discrepancy	.17	.20**					
Achieving	.46**	.63**	.12				
Outdoing	.08	.33**	.33**	.38**			
Pleasing	.14*	.20*	.32**	.23**	.02		
Avoiding	.15*	.09	.13	.11	.01	.52**	
Detaching	-.03	-.10	.34*	-.22**	.04	.02	-.24**

Note.  $N = 223$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

**Table 2**  
Means and Standard Deviations for the Almost Perfect Scale–  
Revised and the Langenfeld Inventory of Personality Priorities for  
Perfectionists and Nonperfectionists

Scale	Perfectionists ( <i>N</i> = 50)		Nonperfectionists ( <i>N</i> = 173)		Effect Size
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Achieving	72.20	6.82	60.66	8.14	1.25*
Outdoing	67.38	8.40	62.14	8.36	0.60*
Pleasing	63.56	10.09	60.65	9.76	0.29
Avoiding	59.66	9.45	59.49	8.36	0.02
Detaching	41.58	11.68	41.98	10.56	0.03

Note. \* $p \leq .001$ .

The one-way multivariate test for perfectionism was significant [Pillai-Bartlett trace (5,217) = .992,  $p < .001$ ]. Subsequent univariate analyses of variance identified significant differences between perfectionists and nonperfectionists on the Achieving ( $F = 83.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Outdoing ( $F = 15.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ) subscales. As suggested by Haase, Ellis, and Ladany (1989), we calculated measures of magnitude of effect. Effect size was computed using Wolf's (1986) equation for group differences. The effect size for the difference between perfectionists and nonperfectionists on the Achieving subscale of the Langenfeld and Main (1983) inventory was 1.25 and on the Outdoing subscale was 0.60, with perfectionists scoring significantly higher than nonperfectionists in each case. There were no significant differences between perfectionists and nonperfectionists on the Pleasing, Avoiding, or Detaching subscales. The means and standard deviations for the dependent variables appear in Table 2.

A second one-way MANOVA with type of perfectionism (adaptive and maladaptive) as the between-subjects factor and the subscales of the Langenfeld and Main (1983) inventory as the dependent variables was also significant [Pillai-Bartlett trace (5,44) = .992,  $p < .001$ ]. Results of follow-up univariate analyses of variance showed that adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists differed significantly from one another on the Outdoing ( $F = 4.49$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and Detaching ( $F = 9.14$ ,  $p < .005$ ) subscales. Listwise deletion of missing data was done before these analyses. The means and standard deviations for the dependent variables appear in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
Means and Standard Deviations for the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised and the Langenfeld Inventory of Personality Priorities for Adaptive Perfectionists and Maladaptive Perfectionists

Scale	Adaptive Perfectionists ( <i>N</i> = 21)		Maladaptive Perfectionists ( <i>N</i> = 29)		Effect Size
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Achieving	70.43	8.02	73.48	5.60	0.45
Outdoing	64.52	7.35	69.45	8.61	0.59*
Pleasing	60.90	7.30	65.48	11.44	0.45
Avoiding	59.33	8.92	59.90	9.95	0.06
Detaching	36.14	9.59	45.52	11.62	0.80**

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ .

## **Discussion**

In this study, to continue our examination of the underlying personality factors involved in perfectionism, we investigated whether there would be a significant difference between perfectionists and nonperfectionists on a measure of personality priorities and a significant difference between adaptive perfectionists and maladaptive perfectionists on a measure of personality priorities.

*Perfectionists versus nonperfectionists.* The findings suggest there were significant differences between perfectionists and nonperfectionists on several subscales of the Langenfeld and Main (1983) inventory. While there were no significant differences between these two groups on the Pleasing, Avoiding, or Detaching subscales, the differences were significant on the Achieving and Outdoing subscales. Given the descriptions of each of these personality priorities, theoretically perfectionists and nonperfectionists should differ on these traits.

It is not surprising that these two groups differed significantly ( $p < .001$ ) on the Achieving and Outdoing subscales. Perfectionists are those individuals who have high standards and so have goals consistent with both Achieving and Outdoing personality priorities. While individuals with these two priorities have different motivations for their striving, both Achieving and

Outdoing individuals tend to have higher personal standards for their own accomplishments than do individuals with the other personality priorities.

Individuals who have high scores on the Avoiding subscale are those who value comfort and avoid stress and stressful situations. When we were first considering these results, we were surprised that there was no significant difference between perfectionists and nonperfectionists on this subscale on the assumption that perfectionists would tend to be those who were willing to sacrifice comfort and involve themselves in stressful situations, while nonperfectionists would tend to gravitate toward comfortable, unstressful experiences. Upon further consideration, it appeared that, although individuals who tend to be perfectionistic may sometimes exhibit tendencies toward working hard, they frequently avoid stress simply because they are so organized and "on top of things."

People who strive to gain control of themselves fit into the category of Detaching, which was essentially the same for both perfectionists and nonperfectionists. These results may suggest that the underlying personality motivation for perfectionism is related more to achievement, as indicated by higher scores on Achieving and Outdoing, than to control.

Individuals who fall into the Pleasing personality priority tend to believe that they must earn the love and support of those around them. They believe that they will be punished or lose the love and support of significant others if they do not devote a great deal of their time and energy to pleasing others. The results of this study seem inconsistent with several findings (e.g., Frost, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1991; Rice et al., 1996; Slaney & Ashby, 1996), suggesting that many perfectionists seem to attribute their tendency toward being perfectionistic to the influence of their parents, either from a positive or negative perspective. These results may suggest that if perfectionists are influenced toward perfectionism by their parents, they may have internalized these motivations, as evidenced by higher Achieving scores. The results do not suggest that perfectionists are more motivated than nonperfectionists by the need to please parents or others.

*Adaptive versus maladaptive perfectionists.* There were significant differences between the adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists in this study on several of the Langenfeld and Main (1983) subscales. While there were no significant differences between these two groups on the Pleasing, Avoiding, or Achieving subscales, there were significant differences between them on the Outdoing and Detaching subscales, as one might expect, given the descriptions of each of these personality priorities.

The significant difference between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists on the Outdoing subscale suggests that these two groups may have different motivations in their striving for high standards, with more maladaptive perfectionists than adaptive perfectionists manifesting the need to outdo others.

This is consistent with Ashby and Kottman's (1996) finding that maladaptive perfectionists have greater feelings of inferiority than adaptive perfectionists.

Maladaptive perfectionists scored higher than adaptive perfectionists on the Detaching scale, suggesting that they are more likely to strive toward gaining control of themselves. These results may indicate that maladaptive perfectionists view the striving for high personal standards as a means of exercising control over self. This is in contrast to the striving for high standards of adaptive perfectionists which does not seem related to control, as indicated by the lack of significant differences between perfectionists and nonperfectionists on the Detaching scale.

### **Conclusion**

Kutchins, Curlette, and Kern (1997) have suggested that further psychometric study and development be conducted on the Langenfeld and Main (1983) inventory. Specifically, researchers using the instrument have found that the Detaching type scale has been consistently underrepresented in sample results (Ashby & Kottman, 1996; Kutchins et al., 1997). This may call into question the use of the instrument for research and suggests limitations of the present study. However, in this study, the Detaching scale appeared as an indicator between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists, indicating that although the scale is underrepresented in general populations, the scale may be useful in identifying maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism in clients. Certainly, we support the suggestions of Kutchins et al. (1997) in recommending additional psychometric research and development of the instrument.

In sum, the present results suggest that perfectionists differ from nonperfectionists in underlying personality structure. Specifically, the results support the Adlerian conceptualization of perfectionists' striving for high personal standards as related to their Achieving and Outdoing personality priorities. The findings also support the contention that adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists differ from one another in their underlying personality structure. These results suggest that maladaptive perfectionists are more likely to organize their lifestyles around Outdoing and Detaching personality priorities.

These results have implications for clinicians and researchers. Clinicians working with clients who are perfectionistic may want to assess the personality priority of clients in determining the adaptive or maladaptive nature of clients' perfectionism. Researchers may want to examine other systematic personality differences between adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists. Finally, researchers may want to examine the origins or etiology of perfectionism and personality priority.

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