

Adaptive Perfectionism not Perfect Enough? Perfectionism and the Pursuit of High Standards: Differences in the Relationship to Interpersonal Distress.



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Introduction

Although some have conceptualized setting high standards as an adaptive form of perfectionism (e.g., Slaney et al., 2001) others have argued that perfectionism is fundamentally different from setting high standards (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Greenspon, 2000; Pacht, 1984) and is more uniformly maladaptive. Setting high standards, an element of conscientious achievement striving (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Moon, 2001), is an adaptive achievement strategy related to positive achievement and affective outcomes (e.g., Locke & Latham, 1991; Wiese & Freund, 2005) and is fundamentally different from striving for perfection. We posit that simply setting high standards does not capture the extreme nature of striving for perfection and that at least one measure that researchers have used to measure adaptive perfectionism captures only conscientious achievement striving. In other words, “adaptive” perfectionism may be adaptive, but it is not perfectionism.

Perfectionism is different from striving for excellence in ways that are likely to make perfectionistic individuals more vulnerable to interpersonal distress. For example, perfectionism is associated with a fearful-avoidant attachment style (Reis & Grenyer, 2002) and interpersonal sensitivity (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). In addition, it is thought to develop in an interpersonal context where love and approval are contingent upon being perfect (Flett et al., 2002). Pacht (1984) saw perfectionistic behaviour as an attempt to win love and approval from others, suggesting that at some level perfectionists are more driven by interpersonal goals than achievement goals. In contrast, a conscientiousness striving for excellence is thought to develop out of self-regulatory abilities that are fostered in a secure attachment to loving caregivers (Drake, Belsky & Pasco-Fearon, 2014; Eisenberg, Duckworth, Spinrad & Valiente, 2014) and is related to reduced interpersonal stress (e.g., Lee-Baggley et al., 2005; Murphy et al., 2013). Given these differences, we would expect perfectionism to have negative interpersonal consequences that would not be apparent for those who set high standards or strive for excellence.

We have presented evidence at previous conferences (Blasberg et al., 2009) that when a measure of high standards is modified to be more perfectionistic, the scale becomes associated with maladaptive intrapersonal outcomes (e.g. anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts). In this study, we present a further test of how the setting of high standards fails to capture the extreme (and interpersonally stressful) nature of perfectionism by examining what happens when items of a scale measuring high standards are made more perfectionistic. Following a methodology developed by Haigler & Widiger (2001) and used in previous research (Blasberg et al., 2009), we altered the items of the high standards subscale of the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (Slaney et al., 2001), a common measure of adaptive perfectionism, to reflect more perfectionistic standards instead of simply high standards. We expected that the newly modified perfectionistic standards scale would be positively associated with maladaptive interpersonal attitudes, behaviours and interpersonally-themed stress and that these relationships will not be observed with the original high standards scale.

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Procedure

An undergraduate female sample ($n=126$) was administered both the Revised Almost Perfect Scale (APS-R; Slaney et al., 2001) and a modified version of this scale with its items made more perfectionistic. The APS-R is a measure of perfectionism that uses the tendency to set high standards as an indicator of “adaptive” perfectionism (Rice & Ashby, 2007). Scale items were modified to reflect the more extreme nature of perfectionism instead of striving for excellence or setting high standards. For example, the item “I expect the best from myself” was modified to “I expect perfection from myself.”

The Need for Approval subscale of the Irrational Beliefs Test (Jones, 1968), the Fear of Negative Evaluation scale (Watson & Friend, 1969), and the State Social Self-esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) were used as measures of maladaptive interpersonal attitudes, while the Rumination about an Interpersonal Offense scale (Wade et al., 2008), and items measuring interpersonally-themed stress from the Inventory of College Student's Recent Life Experiences (Kohn et al., 1990) were used as indicators of interpersonal stress.

Results

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha for all measures

Scale	Mean (SD)	α
APS-R High Standards	39.41 (6.53)	.86
APS-R Perfectionistic Standards	29.45 (8.39)	.88
Fear of Negative Evaluation	18.17 (7.55)	.91
Need for Approval	26.21 (5.88)	.66
State Social Self-Esteem	23.66 (6.48)	.91
Interpersonal Rumination	17.26 (6.76)	.93
Interpersonal Stress	25.04 (6.65)	.81

Table 2.

Correlations of the original and modified standards subscale, and measures of interpersonal distress

	Fear of Neg. Evaluation	Need for Approval	Social Self-Esteem	Interpersonal Rumination	Interpersonal Stress
High Standards	.13 _a	.20 _a *	-.16 _a	.11	.17 _a
Perf. Standards	.42 _b **	.45 _b **	-.45 _b **	.18*	.35 _b **

Note. Perf. = perfectionistic. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$ (2-tailed). Correlations with different subscripts are significantly different from each other at $p < .05$.

Table 3.

Standardized regression coefficients and R² for original and modified standards subscales predicting interpersonal attitudes and distress.

	FNE β	NFA β	SSE β	Int. Rum. β	Int. Stress β
High Standards	-.10	-.02	.09	.02	-.00
Perf. Standards	.49**	.47**	-.50**	.16	.36**
R ² (adj.)	.18**	.20**	.20**	.01	.11**

Note. APS-R = Almost Perfect Scale-Revised, Perf. = Perfectionistic, FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation, NFA = Need for Approval, SSE = Social Self-Esteem, Int. Rum. = Interpersonal Rumination, Int. Stress = Interpersonally-themed stress. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$ (2-tailed). $n = 126$.

Table 1 shows all scales are internally consistent and that means are generally consistent with previous research (see cited development papers). Correlational analyses show that perfectionistic standards predicted maladaptive interpersonal attitudes and distress whereas high standards was only significantly associated with a high need for approval. In addition, with the exception of interpersonal rumination, the correlations between the interpersonal outcomes and perfectionistic standards were significantly different in magnitude from the correlations with high standards.

When the unique relationship of each scale to the interpersonal outcomes was considered in a regression analysis it was even more clear that high standards and perfectionistic standards are different from each other. Table 3 shows that only perfectionistic standard setting was a unique predictor of each negative interpersonal outcome (except for interpersonal rumination, which was nonsignificant for both scales). This suggests setting high standards does not have the same negative interpersonal consequences as setting perfectionistic standards. It is important to note that these results were obtained even though the high standards and perfectionistic standards measures were strongly correlated with each other ($r = .51, p < .001$).

Discussion

This study sought to explore the differences between perfectionistic standards and high standards in terms of their relationship with negative interpersonal outcomes. When a measure of high standards was minimally altered to be more perfectionistic, the modified scale was much more strongly related to maladaptive interpersonal attitudes and stress. While some have conceptualized an adaptive form of perfectionism as setting high standards, this is difficult to reconcile with these findings that suggest when an individual's standards become more perfectionistic, they are likely to be experiencing more interpersonal distress. This lends support to a conceptualization of perfectionism as a personality trait with important interpersonal origins and consequences, rather than an adaptive orientation towards high achievement.

It will be important to test if these findings also hold with male subjects, and to conduct further exploration into what construct measures of high standards actually assess, if not perfectionism.