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ABSTRACT
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Perfectionism and Career Development

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Introduction

Although the effect of perfectionism on academic performance has received increasing attention in recent years, little has been written about the ways it affects career development. Combined with increasing pressures to succeed at the workplace, perfectionism may adversely affect individuals' sense of accomplishment and their actual achievements. Alternatively, for some workers, perfectionism may have positive and adaptive functions. Career practitioners will undoubtedly work with clients whose career development might be affected by perfectionistic beliefs and standards. It is important for career practitioners to become knowledgeable about perfectionism in order to help clients mobilize the positive aspects of perfectionism and counteract its potentially negative influences.

What is Perfectionism?

Earlier definitions of perfectionism emphasized the negative and self-defeating aspects of perfectionism by focusing almost exclusively on excessively high personal standards of performance (i.e., Burns 1980; Hollender 1965; Pacht 1984). The common underlying assumption of these definitions was that such excessively high standards could not be satisfactorily met (Frost et al. 1990). Perfectionists were viewed as appraising their performance in an absolute manner, often engaging in "all-or-none" thinking. Success was interpreted as perfection, and anything less than perfection was equivalent to failure (Burns 1980; Hamachek 1978). The focus of perfectionism research was on personal standards, using the measures of the perfectionism construct that were largely unidimensional.

Research on perfectionism was advanced when perfectionism was considered as a multidimensional construct (Frost and Marten 1990; Frost et al. 1990; Hewitt and Flett 1991). Hewitt and Flett described perfectionism along interpersonal (self-oriented perfectionism) and intrapersonal dimensions (other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism). Self-oriented perfectionists have a strong motivation to set and hold unrealistic self-standards, have personal doubts about their actions, and usually focus on flaws and past failures. Other-oriented perfectionists direct their behaviour outward. They hold unrealistic beliefs and high expectations about the capabilities of others and stringently evaluate others' performance. Socially

prescribed perfectionists believe that others have unrealistic standards and perfectionistic motives for personal behaviours; they fear negative social evaluation, believe in external control of reinforcement, and have a strong need for others' approval.

Other researchers (Frost and Marten 1990; Frost et al. 1990) have also contributed to the understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of perfectionism by identifying its six dimensions. The first feature that distinguishes highly competent and successful perfectionists from perfectionists who set standards that cannot be met in their conceptualization is concern over mistakes. The second dimension of the Frost et al. measure involves the setting of high personal standards. The third and fourth components focus on the parents' attitudes, high expectations, and excessive criticism. This parental influence has been described as the core of perfectionism (e.g., Burns, 1980; Hamachek 1978; Pacht 1984). The fifth dimension includes doubt about the quality of one's performance. An additional dimension measures a tendency to be orderly and/or organized, reflecting orderliness. Common to all types of perfectionism are the excessive standards placed on performance and the stringent ways in which people evaluate themselves and others. Consequently, perfectionism can have serious impact on academic and employment success.

Perfectionism and Academic Achievement

High achievers may be subject to perfectionistic tendencies by setting unattainable or unrealistically high academic goals. Similarly, gifted students who are high achievers may set exceedingly high standards and experience difficulties related to perfectionism (Parker and Mills 1996). However, it is unclear whether the high-achieving gifted students with extremely high standards are healthy achievers or, unhealthy perfectionists, and whether perfectionism is a characteristic of giftedness or it emerges as an internal or external expectation for personal performance (Ablard and Parker 1997). Research has also shown that students with perfectionistic tendencies might experience more intense adjustment issues during the transition to post-secondary education. For example, high-school students at the top of their class might experience emotional difficulties when unable to perform at the same level in their post-secondary program. Students who are not able to perform at the same level may experience loss of self-confidence, fears associated

with performance situations, and a sense of failure that can inhibit success (Arthur and Hayward 1997; Hayward and Arthur 1998).

Self-Oriented Perfectionism
Research has almost consistently showed that high scores on the self-oriented perfectionism scale among university students are associated with depression and higher levels of stress (Arthur and Hayward 1997; Hayward and Arthur 1998; Preusser, Rice, and Ashby 1994). Findings on relationships between self-oriented perfectionism and anxiety are less consistent. Self-oriented perfectionism has also been related to anorexic symptoms among female university students (Hewitt, Flett, and Ediger 1995), was a significant predictor of the Type A personality among university students (Westra and Kuiper 1996), and related to numerous fears involving school performance appraisals (Blankstein et al. 1993). University students scoring high on the self-oriented perfectionism dimension have been described as having difficulty adjusting to new surroundings and holding overly rigid standards (Ferrari and Mautz 1997).

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism
Socially prescribed perfectionism is especially prominent among post-secondary students (Flett et al. 1991b; Halgin and Leahy 1989) who view others as imposing unattainable standards upon their academic performance. Socially prescribed perfectionism can, in combination with other factors such as maladaptive coping and hopelessness, lead to suicidal tendencies (Baumeister 1990; Hewitt and Flett 1991). College students who perceive others as having unrealistically high expectations of them, and who experience depression and a sense of hopelessness, may be at risk for suicide. The intensity of hopelessness has also been identified as a risk factor for students prone to self-oriented perfectionism (Hewitt and Flett 1991; Hewitt et al. 1994).

In contrast to self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism among university students has been more consistently linked with depression and anxiety (Arthur and Hayward 1997; Flett et al. 1997; Hayward and Arthur 1998). The studies show that students' perceptions of others' expectations for their academic achievement, combined with the experience of stress, are critical factors in depression and anxiety experienced among post-secondary students (e.g.,

Arthur and Hayward). Other factors, such as experiencing stressful life events in the achievement domain, may account for the less consistent associations between self-oriented perfectionism and depression (Hewitt and Flett 1993).

High scores on socially prescribed perfectionism have been associated with adjustment problems such as greater loneliness, shyness, fear of negative evaluation, and lower levels of self-esteem (Flett, Hewitt, and De Rosa 1996; Flett et al. 1991a). Preusser et al. (1994) suggested that low self-esteem among university students mediates the association between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression. Socially prescribed perfectionism has also been correlated with negative evaluations of social comparison, submissive behaviour, shame, defeat (Wyatt and Gilbert 1998), and low academic achievement (Arthur and Hayward 1997). The socially prescribed perfectionism dimension has been closely related with generalized and academic procrastination, suggesting that students may procrastinate, in part, in anticipation of social disapproval (Flett et al. 1992).

Other-Oriented Perfectionism
Although other-oriented perfectionism has been associated with many negative interpersonal characteristics, other-oriented perfectionists tend to report less interpersonal stress than self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionists (Hill, Zrull, and Turlington 1997b). While self-oriented perfectionism was associated with assertive and adaptive interpersonal qualities among male and female college students, other-oriented perfectionism was associated with arrogant, dominant, and vindictive characteristics (Hill, McIntire, and Bacharach 1997a). Similarly, while self-oriented perfectionism appeared predominantly adaptive (i.e., showing strong associations with conscientiousness and striving for achievement), other-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism appeared predominantly maladaptive (Hill et al., 1997a). Based on their findings, Hill et al. (1997b) suggested that other-oriented perfectionists might have difficulties developing intimacy and maintaining successful interpersonal relationships.

Other-oriented perfectionism has been related to feelings of anger and hostility toward others and other-directed blame for failure (Hewitt and Flett 1991). Similar to self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism has also been negatively associated with attitudinal flexibility, suggesting that

other-oriented perfectionists appear inflexible and unable to adjust readily to new environments (Ferrari and Mautz 1997). Hewitt et al. (1995) found that other-oriented perfectionism among college students was related to an increased awareness of body image. It appears that concerns about body image are not only directed personally, but also with the need for others to be perfect.

Although most of the studies suggest that perfectionism may be negatively related to performance or psychological characteristics, different dimensions of perfectionism have been shown to have enhanced performance among university students. Flett et al. (1996) suggested that adaptive tendencies may reflect a greater sense of personal control or motivation among self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionists. Self-oriented perfectionism was related to active forms of behavioural coping (Flett, Russo, and Hewitt 1994) and feelings of energy, enthusiasm, self-esteem, and resourcefulness (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988). Similarly, Hart et al. (1998) suggested that socially prescribed perfectionists have a higher degree of objectivity, which enables them to dismiss external standards as unrealistic.

Perfectionism in the Workplace

Only a few studies have examined the experience of employers and employees with perfectionism (e.g., Leong and Chervinko 1996; Mitchelson and Burns 1998; Slaney, Ashby, and Trippi 1995). Although there are many similarities between educational and work settings, more attention is needed to the workplace, especially when demands to "do more with less," to juggle multiple tasks, and pressures to meet deadlines are becoming the reality of many workplaces. The interactions between employers and employees are likely to be affected by self-oriented, other-oriented, or socially prescribed perfectionism. It is very likely that consequences of setting high standards for personal performance, concern for the approval of others, and having high expectations for others in the workplace may be very similar to the impact of perfectionism in academic settings. Employees who are more sensitive to external demands and criticism from others, and employers who have high expectations for their employees, are likely to appraise their occupations as stressful.

Employees' attitudes toward their work roles have been shown to intersect with perfectionism. For example, a study of teachers (Flett, Hewitt, and Hallet 1995) suggests that socially oriented perfectionism appears to be linked with higher levels of job dissatisfaction. This could be partially explained by employees seeking approval from others for their performance. In contrast to educational settings where performance is frequently evaluated and validated, many organizations do not have resources to continually assess employees' accomplishments. Employees struggling with socially oriented perfectionism may find the workplace unfulfilling and stressful for lack of external validation. Work-related burnout and distress were reported in Fry's (1995) study of female executives with high levels of perfectionism. Socially prescribed perfectionism has also been associated with exhaustion and cynicism at work. Female employees who felt pressured by others whom they perceived as having high expectations for them reported feeling tired at work and also experienced parental distress at home (Mitchelson and Burns 1998).

Perfectionism has been also been linked to workaholism (Scott et al. 1997). Perfectionists who have high achievement expectations in the workplace may place considerably more emphasis on their work roles than on leisure or relationship roles. The strong need to be in control often leads to increasing inflexibility and may result in an imbalance between personal, educational, and career life roles. Ever-changing work environments may also contribute to the distress of perfectionists, whose efforts to gain personal control may be negatively affected by the implementation of new workplace structures and procedures. This may, in turn, affect workplace relationships, such as working on team projects, because perfectionists impose high standards not only on themselves but also on others. Difficulties with delegating tasks to others, reaching compromise with co-workers, and giving up control may negatively affect the quality of work produced. Employees with perfectionistic standards might expend their efforts on maintaining control rather than focussing on creative approaches to tasks. Need for control may lead to rigidity with work responsibilities and difficulties in ascertaining priorities. As it was found among post-secondary students, perfectionism at the workplace may create an obstacle in achieving career goals and may result in lower productivity, difficulties with time management and decision-making, and decreased quality of work.

Suggestions for Career Practitioners

Career indecision is just one example of what career practitioners who are familiar with perfectionism may consider among its influences on career development. In the study examining predictors of career indecision among university students, self-oriented perfectionism was negatively related to career indecision, suggesting that students who set high standards for themselves tend to be more decisive, while high levels of socially prescribed perfectionism were a barrier to making career decisions. Leong and Chervinko (1996) suggested that students with high self-oriented perfectionism might have a greater internal locus of control, in contrast with career-indecisive students who have a stronger external locus of control. Again, self-oriented perfectionism appears to have an adaptive component, whereby students feel more in control of decision making, while high levels of socially prescribed perfectionism adversely affect career decision-making. Indecisiveness may arise from fear of disappointing others, anxiety about making the right decision, or avoidance of possible negative consequences of making a decision.

Beyond career decision-making, there are several areas where perfectionism may be directly linked to issues of career development. For example, discrepancies between desired performance and actual productivity may affect job satisfaction. Lack of feedback about performance may also contribute to dissatisfaction by workers who gauge their performance on the basis of input from supervisors and co-workers. Occupational stress, work adjustment, and workplace relationships are other areas where perfectionism may affect career development. There are several possible areas for exploration with clients:

- Explore fears related to making career decisions.
- Describe personal standards of success.
- Describe significant others' standards of success.
- Consider standards in light of current school, work, or other life role demands.
- Encourage clients to discuss performance expectations with significant others.
- Explore perceived costs and benefits of making career decisions.
- Define perceived costs of perfectionism in ways that it affects actual performance.

- Explore possible interpersonal difficulties that affect academic or work success.
- Review skills for success such as time management, prioritizing, delegation, and teamwork.
- Identify academic and work behaviours that support career goals.
- Assist clients to build "selective skills" and apply standards to individual situations, not to all.
- Help clients develop a framework for career exploration and decision making.
- Consider ways that perfectionism can be an asset in current life roles.

Perfectionism has been shown to support and adversely affect academic and employment success. To date, the emphasis in research on perfectionism has been on individuals, and how their characteristics contribute to experiences in academic and employment settings. Although this focus provides many directions and considerations for career practitioners, it ignores conditions in work and school settings that may either support perfectionists or be detrimental to their academic and occupational success.

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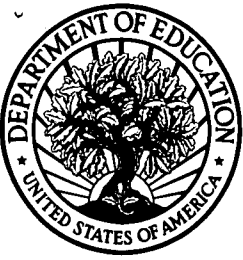
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