Interpreting Successes and Failures: The Influence of Perfectionism on Perspective

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The findings reported in this article are part of a larger study investigating perfectionism in gifted college students. This qualitative interview study examined differences in the interpretation of successes and failures between gifted college students scoring high on either socially prescribed or self-oriented perfectionism. Findings indicated that socially prescribed perfectionists tended to minimize their successes. They made internal attributions for failure, and they overgeneralized and inflated its ramifications. In contrast, self-oriented perfectionists took pride in their successes and made internal attributions for them. With regard to their failures, they made attributions that were situation-specific, and they were able to keep them in perspective. However, they did report frustration and anger when confronting a failure in a situation where they had applied their greatest effort. Based on these findings, implications for future research and recommendations for parents and educators of gifted children are suggested.

Introduction

Perfectionism, a characteristic commonly associated with gifted individuals, has been correlated with indices of maladjustment, including depression, anxiety, low self-confidence, and social phobias (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Juster et al., 1996). One explanation for these correlates may be that perfectionists are highly conscious of evaluative feedback and react strongly to outcomes (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Pickering, 1998). Such attunement to evaluation may influence the ways in which perfectionists interpret successes and failures. It may also influence the attributions, or causal explanations, they give for events that take place (Weiner & Kukla, 1970).

To date, only two studies were found that examined perfectionism and attributions. In one study, Brown et al. (1999) researched the relationship between two dimensions of perfectionism—the

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tendency to set high personal standards and the tendency to be overly concerned with mistakes—and attributions. The researchers found that those who set high personal standards and were able to meet those standards attributed their successes to personal abilities. Because they attributed their success to internal causes, they were motivated to continue meeting their high standards in the future. In contrast, those participants who demonstrated a strong concern for mistakes were more likely to make negative attributions about themselves, including a tendency to blame mistakes on their own personal weaknesses. While this pattern of attributions led to an increase in motivation to achieve their goals, it also contributed to higher levels of anxiety, negative moods, and fear of others' reactions.

In another study, Flett et al. (1998) investigated the relationship among attributions and three different dimensions of perfectionism: (a) self-oriented (the tendency to have high standards and motivation to attain perfectionism, (b) other-oriented (the tendency to focus on the imperfections of others), and (c) socially prescribed (the tendency to perceive that significant others have high expectations for them; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Although the researchers found no correlation between types of attributions and self- and other-oriented perfectionism, they did find that socially prescribed perfectionism was related to a learned-helplessness pattern of attributions in which they attributed both positive and negative outcomes to external factors, demonstrating a perceived lack of control and a tendency to blame others for the outcome of events.

The studies above begin to shape an understanding of the relationship among different dimensions of perfectionism and attributions for successes and failures. No studies were found, however, that examined how giftedness may influence attributional patterns in perfectionists. Attributions and perfectionistic tendencies may be strong predictors of individuals' behaviors and performances in environments that lend themselves to evaluation, such as school (Brown et al., 1999). For a gifted population, these predictors may be even stronger, given the tendency for gifted individuals to be self-critical (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Gifted students are also more likely to adopt an entity view of intelligence, believing that their abilities are fixed (Dweck, 2000). Robinson (2002) noted that, because gifted students can frequently do their school work without effort, they label themselves as "smart." Rather than praising their efforts or persistence, Robinson contended that adults simply confirm the label of smart, thereby feeding an entity view of intelligence.

Individuals who hold entity views of intelligence may make attributions for their successes and failures that lead to maladaptive behaviors. For example, Robinson (2002) noted that these individuals seek safe, low-effort successes in order to prove their abilities. When they encounter challenges or failures, they exhibit a learned helplessness response and may withdraw from the situation because they do not believe effort can increase their chances of succeeding.

Research that investigates the relationships among perfectionism, giftedness, and attributions is needed. To address this gap in the literature, the present study examined the following research question: How do gifted students with either self-oriented or socially prescribed perfectionistic tendencies interpret their successes and failures? I chose to examine only these two dimensions of perfectionism—self-oriented and socially prescribed—because they both focus on individuals seeking perfection within themselves. The third dimension of Hewitt and Flett's (1991) typology—other-oriented perfectionism—was not examined because of its focus on seeking perfection in other people, rather than oneself.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 12 first-year students in the honors program of a large southeastern university. The average SAT score for these 12 students was 1372, with a range of 1300–1520 and a standard deviation of 64.5. In addition, each of the participants in this study was also identified as gifted during elementary school.

To select participants for the study, I used criterion sampling, which is a form of purposeful sampling. This strategy allowed me to identify participants that met a predetermined set of criteria (Patton, 1990). In the present study, the criteria I used for participant selection were as follows: (a) high ability, defined as inclusion into a university honors program as a result of ACT or SAT achievement test scores and high school GPA; (b) 1st-year status; and (c) evidence of perfectionistic tendencies, as defined by a high score on either the socially prescribed or self-oriented subscales of the Hewitt and Flett (1991) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale.

To identify potential participants for interviews, I administered the MPS to 290 1st-year honors students. The MPS is a self-report

measure consisting of 45 items, with 15 items for each of the three subscales. The items are scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Hewitt and Flett (1991) presented substantial data to support the reliability and validity of the MPS in both clinical and nonclinical populations. For the three subscales, the coefficient alphas ranged from .74 to .88, and the test-retest reliabilities for a 3-month period were .75 (self-oriented), .65 (other-oriented), and .78 (socially prescribed). To demonstrate validity, Hewitt and Flett correlated the MPS subscale scores with other theoretically consistent constructs. For example, socially prescribed perfectionism correlated with fear of negative social evaluation, and self-oriented perfectionism correlated with measures of high self-standards and internal importance of strong performance.

The initial criterion for inclusion in the present interview study was obtaining a minimum score of one standard deviation above the mean on only one of the MPS subscales. I set this criterion since the MPS subscales are not entirely independent, with intercorrelations among the subscales ranging from .25 to .40 (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Since the research question focused on comparing differences in perceptions of individuals scoring high on either the self-oriented or socially prescribed subscales, I wanted to ensure that the participants only scored high on one dimension of perfectionism and not both. For the self-oriented subscale, 42 participants met this initial criterion, and for the socially prescribed, 22 participants qualified. Individuals scoring the highest on each of the two subscales were contacted first for interviews. I continued to interview participants in order of their scores on the subscales, beginning with the highest score and moving downward until data saturation was reached. Some participants with the highest scores were not able to participate in the interview process due to scheduling constraints. In these cases, I selected participants with the next highest scores to interview.

This selection process resulted in a total of 12 individuals, 6 with high self-oriented and 6 with high socially prescribed perfectionism scores, who were interviewed for the study. One participant from the socially prescribed perfectionism group was eliminated from the data analysis due to his reluctant participation during the interview experience. Because I sensed the quality of the interview data was weakened by his distrust of the research experience, I did not include his perspective in the analysis. In addition, since data saturation was reached for the socially prescribed perfectionists with the strong data from the other participants, I did not replace him with another potential participant for the study.

Methods of Data Collection

The primary source of data collection I used in this study was in-depth, semistructured interviews. Seidman (1998) described in-depth interviews as consisting of open-ended questions designed for participants to reconstruct their experiences and then explore their meaning. I began with an interview guide that specified a predefined range of topics, yet I proceeded with a flexible format that allowed my participants to initiate new topics or expand on topics significant to them (Payne, 1999).

The interview guide consisted of open-ended, broad questions designed to open up, rather than constrain, the participants' responses. I also borrowed a technique from phenomenological interviewing that involved tapping into the participant's subjective experience, rather than limiting the focus to the external structure of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). For example, after asking my participants to describe a situation in which they experienced academic failure, I asked them the follow-up question, "What was that experience like for you?" Follow-up questions, such as these, provided my participants with the opportunity to reconstruct their experiences according to their own sense of what was important, rather than being led by my interpretation (Seidman, 1998). Consistent with Seidman's recommendations, I designed these questions so they followed directly from what the participant said, asking for clarification, concrete details, and stories. Participants were interviewed for 1½ hours each. Sample interview questions are included in Figure 1.

Additional follow-up interviews and e-mail correspondence took place to complete data collection. For example, one participant asked to be interviewed once more because he felt he needed more time to respond to the interview questions thoroughly. I sent other participants follow-up e-mail questions asking them to expand on their responses to specific interview questions. Following the final interview, I e-mailed my participants and provided them the opportunity to share their final reflections on the research questions. These reflections were treated as additional data and were coded and analyzed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An audit trail of data and data analysis consisting of tape-recorded interviews, interview transcripts, e-mail correspondence, and researcher notes has been preserved.

Control of Researcher Bias

To control for potential researcher bias, I completed member checks with each of my participants. Member checks are defined as

Think of a course that really challenged you and tell me about it in as much detail as possible.
Think of a situation in which you experienced an academic success. Tell me about it.

Probes:
How would you describe your reaction to this success?
What did you view as the cause of your success?
How did (or will) this experience influence your future motivation to achieve in this area?
(Additional stories were requested when necessary to flesh out the data.)

Think of an experience when you did not do as well as you thought you would. Tell me about this.

Probes:
What was your reaction to this experience?
What did you view as the cause(s) of your performance?
How did (or will) this experience influence your future motivation to achieve in this area?
(Additional stories were requested when necessary to flesh out the data.)

Figure 1. Sample interview questions.

the opportunity for participants to review data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions to verify that the researcher has constructed an adequate representation of the participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the present study, the member checks consisted of sending interview transcripts and a draft of the analysis via electronic mail to all of the participants. Along with the attached manuscript, I also included a note to the participants explaining the purpose of the member check and invited them to provide additional material if they felt my interpretation was weak or inaccurate in any area. Upon receiving their suggestions, I made the necessary changes. In all cases, these changes included elaborating on minor details; no participant felt that the analysis misrepresented them.

In addition to completing member checks, I also had a team of qualitative researchers consisting of two professors in a qualitative research program and three graduate students independently code samples of my data in order to verify my data analysis. By com-

pleting these member checks and verification of data analysis, I feel I have taken appropriate steps to minimize the effect of potential bias on the analysis and interpretations of the data.

Methods of Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I used procedures of inductive data analysis. This type of data analysis has been described in a variety of ways by multiple methodologists (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although the specific techniques described vary across methodologists, they each refer to inductive analysis as a process of data management by coding, categorizing into themes, and drawing relationships among themes.

Approaches to inductive data analysis begin with the researcher reading and rereading the data to familiarize herself with it. During this process, the researcher codes the data with words and phrases that mark regularities and emerging patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). For example, when giving explanations for failures, one participant in the present study said, "We've had quizzes where everyone fails. If I studied for it, I can't really blame myself." Another participant commented on the difficulty of college courses and said, "As are not automatic with effort." Both of these comments were coded as "external attributions for failure." This method of coding reduces the data by allowing the researcher to organize, manage, and retrieve meaningful components (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). However, it also functions as a tool to "open up the data," allowing the reader to conceptualize the data, raise questions of it, and generate ideas regarding the relationships among the data (Strauss, 1987).

Using inductive analysis, the researcher then examines codes, grouping them together into categories that reflect broader, more overarching concepts. After coding and categorizing the data, the researcher moves to a process of interpretation. Although informative at all stages of analysis, the researcher's interpretive or theoretical frame is central to the process of identifying relationships among codes (Wolcott, 1994). Dey (1993) encouraged researchers to accomplish this by exploring the data through retrieving codes, breaking them into subcategories, and connecting them together. Discovering the linkages and relationships among categories is the heart of inductive analysis: Within the interpretation of these linkages and relationships, researchers are able to move toward a process of generalization and find conceptual and theoretical coher-

ence within their data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). For example, when coding the data for the self-oriented perfectionists in the present study, I noted codes of "situation-dependent attributions for failures" and "internal, controllable attributions for success." I grouped these codes into a larger category of "healthy attributional patterns," because they were consistent with research and theory on adaptive attributional styles.

Description of Participants

Interview data were analyzed for eleven 1st-year honors program students. Five of these students were selected for their high levels of socially prescribed perfectionism, and 6 were selected for their high levels of self-oriented perfectionism, as indicated by their scores on the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). For the socially prescribed perfectionism group, the average score on this subscale was 77 out of a possible 105. The average score for the entire sample of 290 1st-year honors students was 52, which is comparable to the mean scores of college students noted by Hewitt and Flett in their description of the instrument. They reported that, in their norming sample of college students, the standard deviation for the socially prescribed subscale was 13.85. This indicates the 5 participants in the present study had scores on the socially prescribed subscale that were more than 1.5 standard deviations above the mean.

For the self-oriented perfectionism group, the average score on the self-oriented subscale was 95 out of a possible 105. The average score for the entire sample of 1st-year honors students was 70, which is also comparable to the mean scores of college students in the norming data on the instrument. The standard deviation for the self-oriented scale was 14.95, indicating that the 6 participants in the study had scores on the self-oriented subscales that were almost 2 standard deviations above the mean.

With the exception of 1 Asian male, all of the other participants were Caucasian. The 7 female and 4 male participants all attended college in their home state. Their college majors included the following: political science, journalism, art, English, history, premed, exercise science, psychology, and education. All of the socially prescribed perfectionists had parents with college or graduate-level degrees. Three of the self-oriented perfectionists had parents with high school degrees, and three had parents with college or graduate-level degrees.

Findings: Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

Reactions and Attributions for Successes and Failures

The participants indicated a tendency toward minimizing their successes and maximizing their failures. They expected themselves to meet the standards of others, even when those standards called for perfection. Therefore, the participants perceived academic successes as routine and nothing for which they should feel pride. Failures, on the other hand, were far more salient in their minds. Their fear of disappointing others caused them to focus on their failures, often exaggerating the implications minor failures would have on achieving their overall life goals.

Reactions to Successes. In the words of Paul, the participants responded to successes with "a lack of personal pride." Leigh simply felt relief when she achieved an academic success, for it meant "one more thing I got through." Joyce said she typically did not take pride in her successes because "I feel like I didn't do anything extraordinary for it. I just performed at the level I normally do." To Joyce, success was normal because it meant she was simply meeting the acceptable standard for achievement. When she experienced academic successes beyond the classroom, such as being selected for the Governor's Honors Program, a highly competitive summer program, she attributed it to external factors beyond her control. According to Joyce, "I always just looked at [my successes] as good luck on my part, things that could happen to anyone if they've had the resources I've had."

Dave, too, indicated that successes were not that important. He described a situation in middle school where he won a geography bee, but did not feel proud of himself. According to Dave, he attributed this success, and other academic successes, as well, primarily to ability. Since he did not put forth any extra work, Dave said he did not feel as if he really earned the success. Like Dave, Paul, too, downplayed successes. He said,

> It takes more work for me to think about my successes. For example, it's difficult for me to build a resume because I can't really recall any successes. My constant thought is not really how strong my resume might be, but how weak it is in comparison to the outstanding resumes everyone else must have.

Overreactions to Failures. As difficult as it was for the participants to think about their successes, it was impossible for them not to think about their failures. Each of them recalled fear of failure and

actual failures as being salient in their minds. Paul noted a preoccupation with thinking about opportunities that he did not pursue, which he considered personal failures. Paul described "focusing hopelessly on my personal history and what I could have done better. But, instead of being a constructive evaluation, I just beat myself up over what I have failed to do." In Paul's perception, failure held much more weight than success. When discussing the possibility of achieving a B in a course—a grade he would interpret as a failure—Paul said this grade would disappoint him much more if he were to receive it during his senior year because

> I would think, "Why did I spend all that time working the past 4 years if I just blew it now, the last semester?" [Even if it were a difficult class] that wouldn't matter. If I got a B, that would cancel out everything else I did well.

So salient was failure to Paul, one experience with it could erase an entire history of successes.

Leigh also placed more emphasis on her failures than her successes. Leigh discussed her preoccupation with failure, saying, "I minimize my successes, and then it seems reasonable that the failures would grow to take up that space." Leigh admitted that failure is one of her biggest fears; so, when it occurs, she has a tendency to "dwell on it" and "be pulled down by it," even when everything else is going well in her life. To explain this further, she provided an example from her high school experience where she did not do well in a couple of courses. Because of her performance in these two courses, Leigh found it difficult to focus on the courses where she was doing well. She described it as, "Here's this one weak spot, and that permeates everything else. It spoils everything."

Leigh's preoccupation with failure led her to develop exaggerated beliefs about the ramifications even minor failures would hold toward her future. Upon entering college, she set the goal of graduating with a 4.0. Currently in her first semester, however, this goal has become unattainable due to her struggle with a particularly difficult class. She explained her overreaction to this experience, saying,

> When I realized it was going to be impossible for me to make an A [in my English course] this semester, all things started racing through my mind, like, "What if I'm not going to get to stay in the honors program? What if I am not going to get into graduate school? What if I am not going to get a job?" It becomes this big, sweeping kind of thing, when it's really just a small piece.

Other participants also shared Leigh's tendency to exaggerate the ramifications of failure. Sarah, too, described the cascading effect of failure. To Sarah, one bad grade in a course meant that "You won't do well in the entire course, and then it's just a downward spiral from there." Paul also feared failure because he overgeneralized its implications to other facets of his life. He described his tendency to hide his perception that he lacked ability in math (typically making only 96s, not 100s) from his peers because "If I said I was not good at it, maybe they would think I was not good at other things. Maybe it could spill over into other [areas], and I'm not good at anything."

Internal Attributions for Failures. In addition to exaggerating the implications of their failures, the participants also tended to attribute their failures primarily to internal causes. They assumed all the blame for their failures, seldom acknowledging the role external factors may play in contributing to their performance outcome. For example, Joyce, while freely attributing her academic successes to external factors, took full responsibility for her academic failures. She said,

> Failures are of my own making. I attribute it to my unwillingness to put forth the effort needed to succeed. I've never felt there are things I can't do . . . I know if I work hard enough, I can at least do respectably, if not excel. So the only excuse for failure in an academic area is my own laziness.

Paul described a similar philosophy on failure as Joyce. He assumed if he did poorly in an academic experience, it was his own fault, due to inappropriate preparation. When asked whether or not external factors could ever be attributed as the reason for his lack of success, Paul said "no." He explained that, even if he failed a test along with the rest of the entire class, the failure would still be his fault. He reasoned, "I couldn't really blame the teacher, but I would blame myself probably . . . I should have studied more. The test was made so that you could get a good grade, and I didn't, and it was my fault." The possibility that the test might be flawed was foreign to his thinking.

Consistent with Joyce and Paul, Dave also made internal attributions for his failures. He described feeling frustrated with himself for not doing well in his gifted English classes in high school. Despite having high standardized test scores in this area, he said he still attributed his difficulty to lack of ability. Like the other participants, Sarah also attributed her failures to internal causes.

Because she perceived her failures to be entirely her fault, Sarah described strong self-diminishing emotions that accompanied failure, including guilt and shame. She explained,

> When you get a bad grade on a test, you feel bad inside, and when you are trying to go to sleep at night, you just feel guilt, like really bad, depressive guilt, like you did something seriously wrong that you should be ashamed of. And you have nobody to blame but yourself.

This tendency to attribute all failures inward caused Sarah to develop intense negative feelings. She described these feelings as being invasive, saying, "Sometimes there are things I can't [quit] thinking about" that stay with her for long periods of time "until something else is there to either motivate or bother" her.

Findings: Self-Oriented Perfectionism

Reactions and Attributions for Successes and Failures

Attributions for Successes. Beyond influencing the type of goals they set for their academic achievements, the participants indicated that their self-oriented perfectionism also influenced how they interpreted their successes and their failures. These interpretations then determined their motivation to continue to achieve in these areas.

When describing their successes, the participants made internal attributions. They described feelings of personal pride for their accomplishments because they knew they had earned them based on the amount of preparation they had done. When reflecting on her successes in general, Patsy said she did well because of the amount of effort she had put forth. For example, she was particularly proud of achieving a 95 on her Honors Chemistry test. Describing her reaction to finding out her grade, she said, "I had this grin on my face for, like, an hour because all the hard work paid off." When asked about her attribution for the success, Patsy adamantly stated it had nothing to do with luck. She acknowledged that her intellectual ability played a small role, but the primary reason for her success was "because I worked hard for it." She explained that her success on this test fueled her motivation to achieve on subsequent tests because she could see that her efforts really paid off. It never occurred to her to think, "Oh, I did well, so I can slack off now."

John described his experience of achieving a 5 on his Advanced Placement Physics test, the highest score awarded. He felt "a mix

of satisfaction and pride" because he had worked so hard to achieve the score. In discussing the reason for his achievement, he acknowledged that his natural ability helped, but his hard work in the class definitely paid off, as well. Jane, too, described feeling proud of herself for her successes. In particular, she remembered being ecstatic over receiving the letter that she had been accepted into the honors program in college because all "my hard work, everything I had done in high school" was being rewarded.

Carl discussed his biggest achievement as earning the prestigious fellowship to the university. When relaying the events of this highly competitive experience, Carl indicated that he was especially proud of himself because he learned that he had one of the lowest SAT scores of all the people who were awarded the fellowship (earning a 1410, compared to the average 1500), and many of the students he beat had significantly higher scores than he had. Because he knew he had not earned this award solely on the basis of his ability, he felt even more proud of himself, saying, "The biggest testament to me is that the standardized test didn't determine my getting into the program." He believed the award was a reflection of the amount of preparation he had put forth in writing his application essays, as well as his "personality and ability to handle the pressure" of the interview experience. For Carl, these internal, controllable attributions for his success were a lot more meaningful than if he had been awarded the fellowship based on his ability alone. As he stated, "I considered it a big achievement because I worked so hard, and it's paid off."

Failures Kept in Perspective. Unlike the socially prescribed perfectionists, the self-oriented perfectionists did not overemphasize the implications of their failures. While they admitted to feeling disappointed or frustrated with them, they were able to put them in perspective. For example, when discussing failure weighing on her mind, Crystal responded,

> Maybe [it would weigh on my mind] for awhile, but it wouldn't last indefinitely. If I failed at something and I was disappointed about it, if I did equally as well on something else, then I would try to focus on that. I wouldn't want to think about that. It would probably stick with me for a little while, but I would get over it.

Patsy expressed a similar attitude to Crystal's. She indicated that "if everything was going wrong, then, yes, failure would take precedence, and it would be difficult to shut it out." If, however, she

were to experience a failure in the midst of other successes, she said, "It would not bother me nearly as much because I could concentrate on my achievements [instead]."

Finally, Carl also expressed a healthy reaction to experiencing failures. Rather than feeling defeated or overwhelmed by his failures, Carl commented that he interpreted them as an opportunity to work harder. He explained,

> I never set goals that are unreasonable. So, if I fall short of those goals, the next time that comes around, I am working even harder to get there. As a child, I remember a quote, "Great people make mistakes, but they never repeat them again." That's what I strive for.

Because he has adopted this attitude toward failure, Carl indicated that he was "okay with failing my first test or making a B or C." He granted himself the experience of making mistakes without being a harsh judge on himself. After earning a grade that fell below his standards, however, Carl indicated, "That grade should never happen again because I think I am capable of doing much better." Rather than fearing failure, Carl viewed it as a healthy, natural experience that served as a motivator to work harder in the future.

Attributions for Failures. When assessing experiences in which their performance fell short of their standards, the participants demonstrated a pattern of attributions dependent on the individual situation. They attributed their failures to internal causes when justifiable, such as making preventable errors on exams or not putting forth enough effort. However, they were also quick to recognize the influence of uncontrollable external factors on their performance, and they attributed the cause of their failures to these external factors when they felt it was appropriate.

John described how his attributions for failure differed according to the situation. After receiving a low B on an Honors Chemistry exam in college, John explained,

> I turned it outward because people missed the same problems. So, if [the professor] is asking those and everyone is missing them, then there is something wrong. Typically, if the rest of the class does okay, it's definitely my fault because I should have been right up there with everyone else. But we've had quizzes where everyone fails. If I studied for it, I can't really blame myself.

Mackenzie, like John, also discussed the role of external factors

on her performance. She was currently taking Honors Calculus in college that was similar to a course she had taken in high school and had earned an A. Since she was already well versed in the subject matter, Mackenzie had assumed this course would be an easy one for her. Upon receiving low Bs on her first two exams, Mackenzie was frustrated. She did not attribute her performance to internal causes, for she knew she had the ability to do well and she had put forth significant effort in preparation for the exams. Rather, she attributed it to her professor, realizing that his methods of grading and the format of the class were causing her problems. As frustrated as she felt with the course, Mackenzie acknowledged that she could not completely blame herself, commenting that "This is the way college is," and that "As are not automatic with effort," as she had perceived them to be in high school.

Jane expressed a similar attitude to Mackenzie's, explaining that in high school, she had "the mindset that, if I worked hard enough, I would get an A." Now in college, Jane, too, was becoming more aware of the role of uncontrollable external factors in determining her performance. For example, she said, "You can write the best paper that you've ever written, but if it's just not what the teacher was looking for, you still cannot get as good of a grade." For this reason, Jane said she "no longer beats herself up" if she gets a B, realizing both the increased difficulty of the courses, as well as contributing factors beyond her control.

Carl also discussed external attributions for his own experiences with failure. Carl explained that he was currently having difficulties in his English class because of his writing skills. Although he knew his skills were not as well developed as his classmates', he did not take responsibility. He explained, "I don't blame it on anybody, but I think it's the way our educational system was in [county's name]." The teachers "were not bad; they were just more lenient" in their grading, so he did not have the opportunity to develop his writing skills. Because he attributed his lack of skills to his school experience, Carl did not experience frustration with himself. He knew he was now in a position to control the situation. He said, "Right now, I am having trouble, but I think I am working harder on it than I ever have before," seeking help from professors and writing tutors.

Patsy explained how her attributions for failure and, consequently, her interpretation of the experience differed according to her ability in the subject matter. For example, she perceived herself as having a lower verbal ability. Therefore, when she would receive Bs in her English courses, she attributed those grades to internal,

but uncontrollable causes. She said, "I'm not naturally as smart in English. . . . We would have tests and quizzes over books we read, and I would have no clue." Since she did not perceive herself as having high ability in this area, she was not as hard on herself and took on the philosophy "What you see is what you get." On the other hand, because she perceived herself as "being really good at math and understanding it," when she experienced failures in her math classes, she attributed them to careless mistakes that could have been prevented. She expressed her frustration with herself in these situations, saying, "Why didn't I see that? Why didn't I recognize that? I should have rechecked it."

Frustration With Failure. Despite their tendencies to make attributions that tended to be easier on their egos, the participants still indicated that they felt a great degree of frustration and anger upon experiencing failures. They indicated that these feelings were aggravated by their lack of coping skills. Since they rarely experienced academic failures throughout their school experiences, they found themselves incapable of knowing how to cope with the experience and how to deal with their negative emotions. As a result, they reported strong feelings of frustration and anger.

Patsy described the frustration she experienced when her performance did not meet her standards, despite the tremendous amount of effort she put forth in preparation. In academics, she explained that, after studying so much for a test and still receiving a bad grade, she "feels so upset because it is, like, all of this work is for nothing." She also feels that way when she makes a mistake in her athletic performances. Patsy was quick to note that her feelings were not the result of her fears of disappointing others. She said failure did not make her "feel threatened in any way." She just experienced anger with herself for not meeting her standards. This frustration caused her to decide to quit diving competitively in college. She explained that, because of her emotions, the sport was no longer fun. She said,

> I would just want things to be perfect, and they couldn't be because you can't always do well. I got to the point where it would eat me. And I would go to bed thinking about diving and thinking about what I didn't do right that night or what I needed to do better. It would just take so much energy out of me just because I would focus so much more on the bad part of it, about not being good enough.

For Patsy, her inability to control her negative emotions began to

ruin her internal love of the sport, and "It got to the point where diving wasn't as fun as it used to be."

Carl discussed similar emotions when experiencing failure. He described feeling angry at himself when he knew he had control over the situation and failed anyway. For example, he discussed his reaction to his last exam grade in his Honors Chemistry course. He attributed his low performance to "stupid mistakes, like recording down numbers wrong. I had the concepts down pat." These careless errors made Carl even more frustrated than if he would have done poorly because he did not understand the concept. He said,

> That made me really angry at myself because I knew if I had studied that hard, I blew away those scores because I made silly mistakes on the tests, not because I didn't know the information. It frustrates me because, if it is my mistake, I know I have control over the situation and I know I could have done it right.

Carl's method of coping with his frustration was to work harder in the future, believing that to deliver such a performance again would be inexcusable to himself.

John also discussed his frustrations with his inability to meet his standards after putting forth his greatest amount of effort. He explained that his perfectionism "doesn't necessarily make me want the best grade. What it does is make me want to be rewarded for that effort." Therefore, when his performance did not represent the amount of effort he had put forth, John said,

> It feels much harsher. I tried to be perfect, but it wasn't quite there. It makes me angry when I am not rewarded for my efforts, not really at myself because I know that I've put forth the effort. Not angry at the professor, but just the situation.

John described feelings of frustration and anger when he was unable to grasp concepts he was learning. In his Honors Calculus class in college, John explained that he frequently felt frustrated because he was unable to understand the concepts, and he knew he needed to learn them because subsequent concepts would build on them. John thought his frustration developed as a result of his lack of experience with failures. Throughout his K–12 experience, John explained that he never really experienced an academic failure. His performance was always representative of his ability or the amount of effort he put forth. Now in college, he was experiencing challenges for the first time, and he said he did not know how to cope with these new

experiences of failure. According to John, "You get to college, and it's pretty hard to deal with the fact that sometimes you are not going to make As and sometimes you are going to struggle." He indicated that, in high school, perfectionism was not a problem because "There's not that much of a challenge, [so] it's not hard to be a perfectionist in high school." In college, however, "Making an A is a lot harder, so [my perfectionism] is much more stressful on me now than it ever was in high school." John suggested that the honors program at the university should have a counseling service available to teach students how to cope with perfectionism to make their experiences with failure easier to handle.

The participants also indicated that their frustration with experiencing failure may have stemmed from their need for control. They mentioned their desire to control situations, as Crystal summed up, "If I am in control, then things will go okay. I trust myself." Throughout their school experiences, the participants learned that they could control the outcome of their performance by the amount of effort they put forth. Mackenzie explained this perception, saying,

> With academics, I could always control it myself. If I had a test, I could study as much as I wanted to get the grade that I wanted. I could pull all-nighters and ace the test. Or, if I did badly on it, I knew it was because I didn't study.

When they entered college, however, and began to realize that sometimes their performance was due to circumstances beyond their control, frustration set in as a result. John explained feeling the greatest sense of frustration when his effort did not automatically lead to understanding the material and achieving a high grade. Thus, even though the participants acknowledged the role of external factors in contributing to their failures, a healthier approach than automatically assigning self-blame, they still had difficulty coping with their failures. They did not want to accept that they could not control every outcome, and, as a result, they experienced anger and frustration.

Discussion and Implications

Perfectionism and Attributions

The socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionists in this study described different patterns of interpreting their successes and failures. When discussing their successes, the socially prescribed per-

fectionists were more likely to give external attributions, explaining that their successes were largely the result of luck or contextual variables. As a result, they were not likely to take pride in their successes. This pattern of attributions is consistent with another study examining attributional styles in perfectionists (Flett et al., 1998). In the Flett et al. study of undergraduates, the researchers found a correlation between socially prescribed perfectionism and external attributions for success. The researchers commented that this pattern of attributions is unhealthy, for it prevents individuals from experiencing positive self-reinforcement, which may serve as a partial explanation for the association between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression.

With regard to failure, the socially prescribed participants in the present study overwhelmingly made internal attributions. These attributions were perceived to be both stable and unstable and controllable and uncontrollable. For failures that involved not receiving specific awards, scholarships, or honors, they were likely to attribute the causes to internal, stable, uncontrollable factors, such as "not being a good enough person." In contrast, failures involving such academic work as tests or projects were attributed to internal, unstable, controllable causes, such as not putting forth enough effort. The participants were unwilling to make external attributions, even when external causes appeared to play a primary role in contributing to their failures, as evidenced by Paul's unwillingness to make an external attribution for doing poorly on an exam that was likely flawed. Despite the fact that all the students in the class did poorly, Paul still attributed his performance to lack of preparation, rather than a problem related to the test or the instruction.

The tendency to make internal attributions for their failures is theoretically consistent when considering other correlates of socially prescribed perfectionism. For example, Hewitt and Flett (1991) found that socially prescribed perfectionism is correlated with high levels of self-blame and self-criticism. Given these correlations, it follows logically that these individuals would make internal attributions in which they blamed themselves for not succeeding. However, this pattern is not consistent with prior research. Flett et al. (1998) found that socially prescribed perfectionists were far more likely to attribute failures to external causes, exhibiting a learned helplessness pattern of behavior stemming from their beliefs that they lacked control over the outcomes in their lives. This relationship between socially prescribed perfectionism and learned helplessness behaviors has been documented in the literature (e.g., Hewitt & Flett, 1996). Flett and his colleagues

hypothesized that socially prescribed perfectionists still feel a great sense of self-blame, despite their willingness to attribute failures to external causes because they believe they should be able to overcome these external influences.

Why might the socially prescribed participants in the present study have differed in their attributional pattern for failures from the socially prescribed participants in past studies? One plausible explanation centers on their giftedness. The individuals in the present study described a history of high achievement in academics, stating that they were able to achieve academic perfection throughout most of their school experiences without much effort because the curriculum was not challenging for them. During this time, the adults in their lives, including their parents and teachers, noticed their intellectual capabilities and communicated to the students that, since they were gifted, they should be capable of meeting high academic standards. Over time, the participants may have internalized this message and developed an entity view of intelligence (Dweck, 2000). Therefore, when they encountered an academic failure, they automatically assumed it was their fault since they should have been capable of succeeding because of their intellectual abilities. Future studies comparing the attributions of socially prescribed perfectionists in both gifted and nongifted populations would help to explain the discrepancies in results between the present study and previous research.

Researchers examining attributions have suggested that the most optimal pattern involves attributing successes to internal stable causes, such as ability, and failures to internal, unstable causes, such as insufficient effort (Bar-Tal, 1978; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Platt, 1988). This attributional pattern for failure, however, may not be the most beneficial for individuals with perfectionistic tendencies who already may be overexerting themselves in terms of the amount of effort they put into a particular task. Consequently, attributing a failure they may experience to lack of effort would not be beneficial, as it would only induce greater feelings of self-blame, anger, frustration, guilt, and shame. Perhaps a healthier attribution would be for these individuals to learn that sometimes failures are beyond their control and due to situational circumstances, such as an invalid test or an incompetent professor.

For the self-oriented perfectionists, a different pattern of attributions was found. The self-oriented perfectionists expressed feelings of pride when discussing their academic successes. They made internal attributions for these successes; although they acknowledged the role of ability, effort emerged as the main attribution to

explain their success. They each reflected on how their long hours of studying and preparation of course materials had resulted in good grades, honors, and scholarships. Research has found this pattern of attributions to be healthy because individuals then create the expectation that future success can be achieved through continuing to put forth more effort (Bar-Tal, 1978; Dweck, 1975). When describing their academic failures, no consistent pattern of attributions emerged, a finding consistent with past research on self-oriented perfectionism and attributions for failures (Flett et al., 1998). The participants in the present study made realistic attributions, internal or external, that were situation specific. When they felt that failure was their own fault, they were willing to take responsibility; however, they were also willing to acknowledge the role of external causes beyond their control in other situations, as evidenced by John's changing attributions for not doing well on chemistry exams. This flexible attributional style was healthy for the individuals studied because it fueled their motivation to improve by devoting more effort when necessary and also preserved their self-concept when they recognized their inability to control their failures.

Perfectionistic students could benefit from learning how to make appropriate attributions for failure, such as those made by the self-oriented perfectionists in the present study. These would include attributing failures to internal causes when justified, but recognizing the role of external causes, as well. Teachers could help students learn how to make healthy attributions by discussing a variety of possible explanations for their performance, both internal and external. Such discussions would help perfectionistic students realize that many factors contribute to performance, some of which may be beyond their control. This realization may help them learn how to control their tendencies toward self-criticism and self-blame and, therefore, allow them to process through failures in a more psychologically healthy manner.

Perceptions of Successes and Failures

Not only did the socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionists differ in the attributions they made for their successes and failures, they also differed in their perceptions and the significance they attributed to them. The socially prescribed perfectionists were dismissive in their discussion of their successes because they attributed them to external causes and also because success for them was defined as the norm. They merely viewed their achievements as

meeting basic standards, rather than accomplishing something extraordinary. In contrast, failures were prominent in their minds. To the socially prescribed perfectionists, failures were so looming that they wiped out the significance of any past successes. They also tended to overgeneralize failure, viewing it as having a cascading effect where failure in one area would spill over into all other areas. Their tendency to place so much emphasis on failures led the socially prescribed participants to experience a host of negative emotions, such as anxiety, self-blame, guilt, and shame. These findings support the findings of multiple studies conducted by Hewitt and Flett (1991) on socially prescribed perfectionists and various personality dimensions. Consistent with the relationships identified in the present research, Hewitt and Flett found that socially prescribed perfectionism correlated significantly with overgeneralization of failure, depression, anxiety, and self-blame.

In contrast to the socially prescribed perfectionists, the self-oriented perfectionists in the present study took greater pride in their successes since they attributed them to their hard work. They were also able to keep their failures in perspective. The self-oriented perfectionists viewed failures as temporary setbacks and motivators to improve in the future, as evidenced by Carl's comment, "I never set goals that are unreasonable. So, if I fall short of those goals, the next time that comes around, I am working even harder to get there." Again, this is consistent with Hewitt and Flett's (1991) multistudy analysis of self-oriented perfectionism. The researchers found no correlation between self-oriented perfectionism and overgeneralization of failure. Although the self-oriented perfectionists in the present study were able to keep failures in perspective, they still indicated that they experienced a lot of anger and frustration as a result of their failures. These negative emotions have also been reported in the literature, with self-oriented perfectionists exhibiting high levels of self-criticism, self-blame, and anxiety (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

The feelings of frustration and anger following academic failure experienced by the self-oriented perfectionists in the present study may also have been exacerbated by their school experiences and their giftedness. The participants indicated that, because of their giftedness, they were able to succeed with little or no effort throughout the majority of their school experiences. When they did encounter challenging materials, they were able to master them by applying effort. Therefore, failure was not an outcome they were accustomed to experiencing. When they entered their last years of high school and first semester of college, however, school became

far more challenging for them. For the first time, many met an academic challenge they could not master, despite the amount of effort they put forth. They did not know how to cope with this new experience of failure, and they became extremely frustrated and angry with themselves.

The findings on how the socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionists interpreted successes and failures have implications for educators and counselors. These students may need help learning how to interpret their successes and failures. Socially prescribed perfectionists may need attributional retraining that would help them learn to take pride in their successes and perceive them as the product of their hard work (Dweck, 2000; Robinson, 2002). Both the self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionists may benefit from counseling sessions that focus on managing emotions resulting from experiencing failure. Several of the participants said they wished such a counseling service was available for them. Honors programs on college campuses might want to consider offering such a counseling service, especially for 1st-year honors students who may be experiencing their first encounters with academic challenges and failures. In addition to all the other adjustments of college, they may be especially vulnerable to psychological distress due to their perfectionism. Utilizing available counseling resources may help them learn to manage their perfectionism and emotions related to academic pressures.

The findings of the present study indicate different patterns of interpreting successes and failures for socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionists. The pattern of minimizing successes and maximizing failures may have a negative influence on the subsequent achievement motivation of socially prescribed perfectionists. Likewise, the self-oriented perfectionists also indicated that they needed help learning how to control the frustration and anger that accompanies their performances that are less than perfect. Both types of perfectionists, therefore, are in need of assistance from parents and educators so they may learn how to better manage the attributions and emotions connected to experiencing successes and failures. Such assistance will help both types of perfectionists adopt psychologically healthier approaches to achievement.

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