

## Personality and Perfectionism: A Review

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**ABSTRACT:** This is a brief review regarding the relationship between personality and perfectionism. What is meant by the words perfectionism? Perfectionism is not necessarily about being perfect. It is the relentless striving for extremely high standards that are personally demanding. Perfectionists are divided into two types, adaptive and maladaptive. It has been found that both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists have high personal standards, but failing to meet those standards is more stressful for the latter than for the former. Perfectionism is often mistaken for being perfect or doing something perfectly. This review defines perfectionism and identifies both the helpful and the unhelpful aspects of being a perfectionist, and determines in what ways you might be a perfectionist. Perfectionism is one of Raymond Cattell's 16 Personality Factors. According to this construct, people that are organized, compulsive, self-disciplined, socially precise, exacting will power, controlled, and self-sentimental are perfectionists. In the Big Five personality traits, perfectionism is an extreme manifestation of conscientiousness and can provoke increasing neuroticism as the perfectionist's expectations are not met. This brief review focuses on the relationships between the perfectionism and the personality traits. The following recommendation can be made in light of the findings of this review, whose aim was to examine the relationship between perfectionist personal traits and the personality traits. It is therefore recommended to consider both aspects of perfectionism and to concentrate more on the positive aspects of perfectionism.

**Key words:** Personality, Perfectionism, Personality Traits

### INTRODUCTION

#### Perfectionism

What is meant by the words perfectionism? Perfectionism is not necessarily about being perfect. It is the relentless striving for extremely high standards that are personally demanding. Perfectionists are divided into two types, adaptive and maladaptive. It has been found that both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists have high personal standards, but failing to meet those standards is more stressful for the latter than for the former. Perfectionism is often mistaken for being perfect or doing something perfectly. Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by a person's striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high performance standards, accompanied by overly critical self-evaluations and concerns regarding others' evaluations (Stoeber and Childs, 2010; Flett and Hewitt, 2002).

It is best conceptualized as a multidimensional characteristic, as psychologists agree that there are many positive and negative aspects (Yang and Stoeber, 2012).

#### Historical Overview

Why do many researchers find it difficult to accept that perfectionism can be positive?

Traditionally, perfectionism has been associated with psychopathology, with psychodynamic theory stressing that perfectionism was a sign of a neurotic and disordered personality. Even though Hamachek (1978) published his proposal to distinguish two forms of perfectionism—normal perfectionism and neurotic perfectionism—at the end of the 1970's, the dominant view of the 1980's was that perfectionism was always neurotic, dysfunctional, and indicative of psychopathology. Empirical findings supported this view. Studies with clinical populations found elevated levels of perfectionism in clients diagnosed with depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and eating disorders, and studies with nonclinical populations found perfectionism to be related to higher levels of distress and to pathological symptoms associated with depression, anxiety, and disordered eating (Stoeber and Rambow, 2007).

This changed at beginning of the 1990's, when two research groups independently demonstrated that perfectionism is multidimensional in nature, and provided perfectionism research with two multidimensional scales to capture the construct in all its facets (Stoeber and Rambow, 2007). Frost et al. (1990) proposed that six facets in the experience of perfectionism be differentiated—personal standards, organization, concern over mistakes, doubts about

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actions, parental expectations, and parental criticism. Hewitt and Flett (1991) proposed that three facets of perfectionism be differentiated — self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and other-oriented perfectionism.

Frost et al. (1993) made three important contributions. First, they showed that the different facets of perfectionism combined to form two basic dimensions of perfectionism. Second, they showed that these two basic dimensions related to different characteristics. Third, they showed that only the perfectionistic concerns dimension related to negative characteristics whereas the perfectionistic strivings dimension related to positive characteristics—and thus provided first empirical evidence that some forms of perfectionism can be positive.

Hamachek was one of the first psychologists to argue for two distinct types of perfectionism, classifying people as normal perfectionists or neurotic perfectionists. Normal perfectionists pursue perfection without compromising their self-esteem, and derive pleasure from their efforts. Neurotic perfectionists strive for unrealistic goals and consistently feel dissatisfied when they cannot reach them (Hamachek, 1978). Today researchers largely agree that these two basic types of perfectionism are distinct (Rice et al., 2011). They have been labeled differently, and are sometimes referred to as positive striving and maladaptive evaluation concerns, active and passive perfectionism, positive and negative perfectionism, and adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism (Stoeber and Otto, 2006). Although there is a general perfectionism that affects all realms of life, some researchers contend that levels of perfectionism are significantly different across different domains (i.e., work, academic, sport, interpersonal relationships, home life) (Yang and Stoeber, 2012). Perfectionism consists of two main dimensions: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber and Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic strivings are associated with positive aspects of perfectionism; perfectionistic concerns are associated with negative aspects. Healthy perfectionists score high in perfectionistic strivings and low in perfectionistic concerns. Unhealthy perfectionists score high in both strivings and concerns. Nonperfectionists show low levels of perfectionistic strivings (Stoeber and Otto, 2006). Prompted by earlier

research providing empirical evidence that perfectionism could be associated with positive aspects (specifically perfectionistic strivings) (Frost et al., 1993), they challenged the widespread belief that perfectionism is only detrimental. In fact, people with high levels of perfectionistic strivings and low levels of perfectionist concerns demonstrated more self-esteem, agreeableness, academic success, and social interaction. This type of perfectionist also showed fewer psychological and somatic issues typically associated with perfectionism, namely depression, anxiety, and maladaptive coping styles (Stoeber and Otto, 2006).

### **Personality**

Personality is derived from the Latin word, *persona*, where it originally referred to a theatrical mask (Bishop, 2007). The study of personality started with Hippocrates' four humors and gave rise to four temperaments (Storm, 2006). Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristics behavior and thought (Allport, 1937). Weinberg and Gould (1999) defined personality as the characteristics or blend of characteristics that make a person unique. The American Psychological Association defines personality as individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Kazdin, 2000). The study of personality focuses on two broad areas: (1) understanding individual differences in particular personality characteristics, such as sociability or irritability and (2) understanding how the various parts of a person come together as a whole (Kazdin, 2000).

The word "personality" originates from the Latin "*persona*", which means mask. Personality also refers to the pattern of thoughts, feelings, social adjustments, and behaviors consistently exhibited over time that strongly influences one's expectations, self-perceptions, values, and attitudes (Winnie and Gittinger, 1973; Krauskopf and Saunders, 1994). The study of personality has a broad and varied history in psychology with an abundance of theoretical traditions. The major theories include dispositional (trait) perspective, psychodynamic, humanistic, biological, behaviorist, evolutionary, and social learning perspective.

### **Background and History**

The study of personality started with Hippocrates' four humors and gave rise to four temperaments (Storm, 2006). The explanation was further refined by his successor Galen during the second century CE. The "Four Humors" theory held that a person's personality was based on the balance of bodily humors; yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood (Carlson, et al., 2010).

Sir Francis Galton in 1884 made the first major inquiry into a hypothesis that by sampling language it is possible to derive a comprehensive taxonomy of human personality traits: the lexical hypothesis (Shrout and Fiske, 1995). Personality is usually broken into components called the Big Five, which are openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (or emotionality). These components are generally stable over time, and about half of the variance appears to be attributable to a person's genetics rather than the effects of one's environment (Krauskopf and Saunders, 1994; Briley and Tucker-Drob, 2014).

Lewis Goldberg proposed a five-dimension personality model, nicknamed the "Big Five" (Albert, et al., 2009): (a) Openness to Experience: The tendency to be imaginative, independent, and interested in variety vs. practical, conforming, and interested in routine. (b) Conscientiousness: The tendency to be organized, careful, and disciplined vs. disorganized, careless, and impulsive. (c) Extraversion: The tendency to be sociable, fun-loving, and affectionate vs. retiring, somber, and reserved. (d) Agreeableness: The tendency to be softhearted, trusting, and helpful vs. ruthless, suspicious and uncooperative. (e) Neuroticism: The tendency to be anxious, insecure, and self-pitying vs. calm, secure, and self-satisfied (Sanrock, 2008). Personality can be determined through a variety of tests, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-2), Rorschach Inkblot test, Neurotic Personality Questionnaire KON-2006 or Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-R) (Aleksandrowicz et al., 2009).

### **A Brief Review of the Literature**

A review of the current literature reveals that there has been a lot of research on the effect of personality on learning processes in different age

groups and at different circumstances. The following studies are a few examples of such research work:

Forghani, et al., (2013): The role of personality traits in perfectionism orientation (Isfahan Melli Bank employees).

Frost, et al., (1990): The dimensions of perfectionism.

Frost, et al., (1993): A comparison of two measures of perfectionism.

Fry and Debats, (2009): Perfectionism and the five-factor personality traits as predictors of mortality in older adults.

Hewitt, et al., (1992): Perfectionism and multiphasic personality inventory (MMPI) indices of personality disorder.

Khodarahimi, (2010): Perfectionism and five-big model of personality in an Iranian sample.

Köksal-Akyol and Sali, (2013): A study on the perfectionist personality traits and empathic tendencies of working and non-working adolescents across different variables.

McCrae and Costa, (1999): A five-factor theory of personality.

Navarez, (2011): Exploring the factors of perfectionism within the Big-five personality model among Filipino college students.

Rahmani, et al., (2014): Self-efficacy, perfectionism, and personality traits as predictors of academic procrastination among university students.

Rasooli and Lavasani, (2011): Relationship between personality and perfectionism with body image.

Stoeber, et al., (2009): Perfectionism and the Big-five: Conscientiousness predicts longitudinal increases in self-oriented perfectionism.

Khodarahimi (2010) studied the relationship between perfectionism and Big-five model of personality in an Iranian sample. The purpose of his research was to examine the relationship between perfectionism and Big-five personality, as well as the possible effects of gender and age group differences on these in Iranian adolescents and young adults' sample. Results showed that there were significant negative correlations between perfectionism, neuroticism, and agreeableness, but there was no significant correlation between perfectionism, extroversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. However, no significant effects of

gender and age group differences on perfectionism and personality were noticed. Finally, the results showed that only neuroticism explained perfectionism variation in the total sample (Khodarahimi, 2010).

Frost, et al., (1993) in their study compared two recently developed measures of perfectionism. Students completed the Frost, et al.'s (1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale and the Hewitt and Flett's (1991) scale of the same name. Their relationships to each other, as well as to measures of affect, were examined. There was a considerable overlap in the two measures of perfectionism. Frost, et al.'s Personal Standards scale was most closely associated with Hewitt and Flett's Self-Oriented Perfectionism scale. Frost, et al.'s Concern over Mistakes, Parental Expectations, and Parental Criticism scales were independently correlated with Hewitt and Flett's Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism scale. The subscales from each measure showed differential relationships with measures of positive and negative affect. Those dimensions which have been found to be related to symptoms of psychopathology were most closely related to negative affect (e.g. Concern over Mistakes, Socially- Prescribed Perfectionism), while those which have been found to be related to more "healthy" characteristics were associated with positive affect (e.g. Personal Standards, Other-Oriented Perfectionism). A factor analysis resulted in a conceptually clean two-factor solution. The first of these reflected maladaptive evaluation concerns, and the second reflected positive achievement strivings.

Köksal-Akyol and Sali (2013) conducted a study with the goal of examining the perfectionist personality traits and empathic tendencies of adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17. Data were collected by means of a "General Information Form," the "Child and Adolescent KA-SI Empathic Tendency Scale - Adolescent Form," and the "Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale". Results showed that work status appeared to be a factor behind the statistically significant differences in favor of non-working students in the order sub-dimension of perfectionism and in favor of working adolescents in the sub-dimensions of excessive concern over mistakes and family criticism, whereas difference in gender appeared to be factor behind the statistically significant difference observed in favor of females in the order sub-dimension of perfectionism. It was also

found that work status, gender, and age appeared to be behind the statistically significant differences in the following sub-dimensions, respectively: in favor of non-working adolescents for cognitive empathy, in favor of females in the sub-dimension of empathic tendency and total empathy score, and in favor of students aged 17 for cognitive empathy and in the total empathy score. Results of the regression analysis showed that the sub-dimension of order on the adolescents' perfectionism scale help to predict their emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, and total empathy tendencies both meaningfully and in a positive direction (Köksal-Akyol and Sali, 2013).

Forghani, et al. (2013) investigated the role of personality traits in perfectionism orientation among Isfahan Melli Bank employees. Results showed that there were significant relationships between personality traits and perfectionism orientation. Also, the results revealed that significant relationships were found between perfectionism and dimensions of personality traits (Forghani, et al., 2013).

Rasooli and Lavasani (2011) studied the relationship between Big-five factors of personality and perfectionism (positive and negative) with body image. NEO-Five Factor Inventory, Farsi version of the Positive and Negative Perfectionism scale (FPANPS) and Body Image Concern Inventory (BICI) were used. Results showed a significant positive correlation between neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness with body image and also a significant negative relation between conscientiousness and extraversion. Results also revealed that perfectionism (positive and negative) is the significant predictor for body image. They concluded that personality (conscientiousness and agreeable) and two dimensions of perfectionism can predict the body image and its factors (Rasooli and Lavasani, 2011).

Stoeber, et al. (2009) stated that findings from cross-sectional studies on the relationship between perfectionism and the Big-five personality traits demonstrate that conscientiousness shows significant positive correlations with self-oriented perfectionism, and neuroticism with socially prescribed perfectionism. The question is whether conscientiousness and neuroticism also predict longitudinal changes in self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism. Conscientiousness predicted longitudinal increases in self-oriented

perfectionism. Neuroticism, however, did not predict any longitudinal increases in perfectionism—neither in self-oriented nor in socially prescribed perfectionism. Providing support for McCrae and Costa's dynamic personality theory (McCrae and Costa, 1999), which holds that broad personality traits play a part in the development of lower-level personality characteristics, the findings suggest that conscientiousness is a trait that plays a role in the development of self-oriented perfectionism (Stoeber, et al., 2009).

Fry and Debats (2009) studied the relationship between perfectionism and the five-factor personality traits as predictors of mortality in older adults. Findings demonstrated that risk of death was significantly greater for high scorers in perfectionism and neuroticism, compared to low scorers at the time of base line. Conversely, risk of death was significantly lower for high scorers in conscientiousness, extraversion, and optimism (Fry and Debats, 2009).

Hewitt et al. (1992) in their study tested the hypothesis that personal and social aspects of the perfectionism construct are related differentially to indices of personality disorders. Participants were examined with respect to their scores on the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) and the personality disorder subscales (PDS) of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. Results showed that the perfectionism dimensions of the MPS were related to various perfectionism dimensions in question (Hewitt et al., 1992).

Navarez (2011) aimed to determine if perfectionism through its different scales would have an effect on the five factors of personality. The scales of perfectionism included Concern over Mistakes, Personal Standards, Parental Expectations, Parental Criticism, Doubt about actions, and Organization. The five factors of personality tested included Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. The study was based on the theory of Perfectionism by Frost and the Big Five Factor Theory of Personality. Results revealed that the proposed model showed adequate goodness of fit (Navarez, 2011).

Rahmani et al. (2014) aimed to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy, perfectionism dimensions, and personality traits and to determine the role of those variables in prediction of academic procrastination among female university students.

Data were collected using Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS), General Self-efficacy Questionnaire (GSFQ), NEO personality traits (NEO), and Procrastination Assessment Scale (PAS). Results showed that Neuroticism have a positive relationship with academic procrastination and conscientiousness have a negative relationship with academic procrastination (Rahmani et al., 2014).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

As mentioned earlier, perfectionism is not necessarily about being perfect. It is the relentless striving for extremely high standards that are personally demanding. Perfectionists are divided into two types, adaptive and maladaptive. It has been found that both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists have high personal standards, but failing to meet those standards is more stressful for the latter than for the former. Perfectionism is often mistaken for being perfect or doing something perfectly. This brief review focuses on the relationships between perfectionism and the personality traits. The following recommendation can be made in light of the findings of this review, whose aim was to examine the relationship between perfectionist personal traits and the personality traits. It is therefore recommended to consider both aspects of perfectionism and to concentrate more on the positive aspects of perfectionism.

### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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