

PERFECTIONISM, PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Studies show that perfectionism is associated with academic performance, because people with a high level of perfectionism study more, they are rather intrinsically motivated and have higher performance standards. However, certain dimensions of perfectionism and an excessively high level are associated with low well-being, emotional exhaustion and frustration when the results are not the desired ones.

This study aimed to assess the relationship between perfectionism, wellbeing and academic performance in students. Perfectionism was assessed using a shortened version of the Frost et al. Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (F-MPS-Brief) (Burgess, Frost, & DiBartolo, 2016), and a shortened version of the Psychological Wellbeing Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) was used to identify students' level of wellbeing. Students reported their academic performance in their last semester of study. Participants in this study included 362 Romanian students from different academic majors and with different degrees. The results revealed significant correlations between dimensions of perfectionism, wellbeing and academic performances. Our findings extend the current understanding of the relationship between students' perfectionism, wellbeing and academic performance.

Keywords: perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, psychological well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies show that the level of perfectionism among higher education students has increased over the last three decades. Recent generations of young people feel that others have higher expectations of them and that they have higher expectations of others and of themselves (Curran & Hill, 2019). Perfectionism has often been associated with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and stress, so it is important to understand its impact on students so that educational professionals and psychologists can develop interventions to improve student well-being.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is defined as a personality trait characterized by exceptionally high standards of performance accompanied by tendencies towards excessively critical assessments of one's own behavior (Frost et al., 1990).

Perfectionism is a concept extensively studied. There are different definitions and conceptualizations of this construct, which can be categorized according to the unidimensional or multidimensional approach to perfectionism. Research has, however, provided ample evidence supporting the

multidimensional view of perfectionism. One area of research has highlighted the personal (self-oriented perfectionism), and interpersonal (other-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism) dimensions. Also in the multidimensional paradigm, the positive and negative aspects of perfectionism have been investigated, originally called normal perfectionism (setting realistic standards that lead to increased self-esteem) and neurotic perfectionism (setting exceptionally high standards that lead to fear of failure and concern about how one is perceived) (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). In subsequent research, factor analysis identified two dimensions called perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. Perfectionistic strivings involve high personal performance standards and a self-oriented striving for perfection. This represents the positive side of perfectionism, with most studies showing correlations with positive characteristics. However, some studies have also observed relationships with negative characteristics. Perfectionistic concerns involve worries about making mistakes, pressure from societal expectations for perfection, and the perceived gap between results and high expectations. Perfectionistic concerns are defined as a form of negative perfectionism (Stoeber, & Otto, 2006).

Well-being

Psychological well-being refers to an individual's subjective experience of positive psychological states, such as happiness, life fulfillment, and a sense of purpose (Dhanabhakya & Sarath, 2023). Over time, well-being has been defined either by the frequency of positive affective states or by appealing to constructs such as life satisfaction and happiness (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In an attempt to provide conceptual clarification, Ryff (1995) synthesises the various operationalisations of the concept from developmental psychology, clinical psychology and the literature on mental health, identifying common elements. The multidimensional model of psychological well-being proposed by Ryff (1995) contains six key dimensions: self-acceptance: a positive self-attitude; accepts all aspects of self, both good and bad; a positive outlook on past life; positive relationships with others: fulfilling, and trusting relationships with others; shows concern for their well-being; capable of deep empathy, affection, and intimacy; understands reciprocity in human relationships; autonomy: self-determination and independence; capable to withstand societal pressures dictating thoughts and actions; self-regulates behavior and self-evaluates according to his own set of standards; environmental mastery: a feeling of mastery and competence in handling the environment; makes the most of available opportunities; has the ability to shape environments that align with personal needs and values; purpose in life: has life goals and a sense of purpose; perceives meaning in both past and present experiences; holds beliefs that provide purpose to his life and sets aims for living; personal growth: a sense of ongoing growth and development; sees self as evolving and broadening horizons; feels like he's developing his own potential; observes personal improvement and behavioral changes over time; and evolves in ways that reflect deeper self-awareness and increased effectiveness.

Perfectionism and well-being

Perfectionistic strivings are often associated with psychological adjustment (e.g., conscientiousness, problem-focused coping, positive affect, psychological well-being, self-efficacy, active coping). Conversely, perfectionistic concerns are consistently associated with psychological difficulties (e.g., neuroticism, avoidant coping, negative affect, high levels of burnout, lower degree of psychological well-being, emotion dysregulation and low self-compassion) (Zeifman et al., 2020; Stoeber et al., 2019; Stoeber, Damian & Madigan, 2018; Suh et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2016; Dunkley et al., 2003; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008; Stoeber & Rambow, 2007).

Suh et al. (2017) identified a higher level of presence of meaning (life has a clear sense of purpose) in students with adaptive perfectionism. The authors explain these results by their greater flexibility

in perceiving what activities create meaning and their perseverance in the search for meaning even in the face of obstacles. Students with adaptive perfectionism also reported higher levels of happiness and satisfaction with life. Conversely, maladaptive perfectionists are higher on the search for meaning dimension (always searching for something that makes life feel significant). They may constantly seek meaning in life but not feel its presence. Other studies have reported slightly different results. In a study conducted by Chang in 2006 on college students, other-oriented perfectionism, the tendency for an individual to expect others to be perfect in their performance (a more adaptive form of perfectionism), was found to have no correlation with any of the six dimensions of psychological well-being. In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism, the tendency for an individual to believe that others expect perfection from them (a maladaptive form) was found to be significantly and negatively correlated with all six dimensions of psychological well-being. Similarly, in a study involving psychology students, Hill et al. (2010) obtained low correlations between perfectionistic strivings and only two of the well-being dimensions, namely environmental mastery and purpose in life. The results showed no correlations between perfectionistic strivings and the other dimensions of well-being. Instead, negative correlations were obtained between perfectionistic concerns and all dimensions of well-being. The authors explained these data by the fact that perfectionistic concerns act as a suppressor variable in the relationship between perfectionistic strivings and well-being. When the variance attributed to perfectionistic concerns was controlled for in the correlations between perfectionistic strivings and psychological well-being scales, robust positive relationships emerged.

Perfectionism and academic performance

Stoeber, Damian & Madigan (2018) examine perfectionism from a motivational perspective, namely Achievement Motivation Theory. Within this theory a distinction is made between hope of success (people are motivated to achieve success) and fear of failure (people are motivated to avoid failure). The cited authors reviewed a number of studies and identified positive correlations between hope of success and perfectionistic strivings and between fear of failure and perfectionistic concerns. It was observed that perfectionistic strivings are mainly approach-oriented and perfectionistic concerns are mainly avoidance-oriented. The same investigators examined perfectionism from the Self-Determination Theory of motivation perspective (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and identified that perfectionistic strivings correlate with intrinsic motivation and integrated regulation, while perfectionistic concerns correlate with amotivation and external regulation. This explains why a high level of perfectionistic strivings is associated with high performance and achieving significant goals, but not a high level of perfectionistic concerns. Madigan (2019) reports significant small-to-medium positive correlations between perfectionistic strivings and academic achievement and significant small negative correlations between perfectionistic concerns and academic achievement. Students high in perfectionistic strivings are self-determined, are intrinsically motivated and want to achieve success. In contrast, students high in perfectionistic concerns are more afraid of failure, tend to procrastinate and experience burnout. Studying the relationship between perfectionism and academic achievement, Damian et al. (2017) found that high academic achievement play a role in the development of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns.

Well-being and academic performance

Although the results on the relationship between well-being and academic performance are inconclusive, in the meta-analysis by Kaya & Erdem (2021), the investigators found a positive and small association between well-being and academic performance. Motivational factors influence well-being, thereby increasing engagement, which may ultimately lead to improved academic performance (Reeve, 2012). Similar results were reported by Trucchia et al. (2013) in a study of

medical students. High academic achievers reported high levels of well-being, direct coping strategies and problem-solving orientation, while low achievers reported low levels of satisfaction and avoidance behaviours in the face of difficulties and environmental demands.

Students who experience psychological well-being may have more positive attitudes towards learning, concentrate better and are more motivated to learn. Based on these results, attention is drawn to the emphasis that schools should place on aspects related to student well-being.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the relationships between students' perfectionism, psychological wellbeing and academic performance.

Hypothesis

We presume that:

H1 There is a negative correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and psychological wellbeing.

H2 There is a positive correlation between adaptive perfectionism and academic performance.

Participants

362 university students from a public Romanian university, from different study programs took part in this study. 35 (9.7%) participants are males, 324 (89.5%) are females, 1 (0.3%) are other gender and 2 (0.6%) didn't report their gender. Their ages vary from 18 to 62 ($M=29.08$, $SD=11.28$).

The majority of the students study Social Sciences (Psychology, Social Work, Education Sciences etc.). 319 (88.1%) participants study in a Bachelor degree program, 41 (11.3%) are Master's degree students and 2 (0.6%) didn't report their level of study. 179 (49.4%) students are Freshmen, 117 (32.3%) are Sophomores, 59 (16.3%) are Senior students and 7 (1.9%) didn't report their year of study.

Measures

Perfectionism

We used **Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale-Brief (F-MPS-Brief)** (Burgess et al., 2016), an eight-item scale, with a 5 point Likert-type response scale (1 – strong disagreement, 5 – strong agreement). The scale evaluates two dimensions of perfectionism: Striving (S) and Evaluative Concerns (EC). The Striving dimension represents high goal setting and striving for achievement. The Evaluative Concerns dimension includes self-criticism for not reaching one's goals and worry about negative performance evaluation.

Original scale reliability has very good values. Alpha's Cronbach is .81 for the S factor and .83 for the EC factor. For the present study, alpha's Cronbach coefficients are .69 for the S scale and .75 for the EC factor.

Psychological wellbeing

Psychological Wellbeing was assessed using **Psychological Wellbeing Scale** (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). We used the shortened version of the scale (18 items), with a 7 point Likert-type response scale (1 – Totally disagree, 7 – Totally agree). The scale evaluates 6 dimensions: Autonomy (self-determination, independence, and the regulation of behavior from within), Environmental Mastery (being able to manipulate and control complex environments), Personal Growth (interest in realization of personal potential), Positive Relations with Others (having trusting and warm interpersonal relations), Purpose in Life (creating meaning and direction in life), Self-Acceptance (holding positive attitudes toward oneself) (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Alpha's Cronbach coefficients for the original version of the scale were low to modest, ranging from .33 (Purpose in Life) to .56 (Positive Relations with Others). Estimates of internal consistency were also low to modest for the present sample, varying from .33 (Personal Growth) to .54 for Positive Relations with Others. Alpha's Cronbach for the whole scale is .74 for the present study. Taking this into account, we decided to use only the global score.

Academic performance

Students were asked to report their grade average for the last term. In Romania, the grading system includes a range from 1 to 10 and grade for passing an exam is 5.

All the data were collected online, using Google forms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Our results indicate that there are two very significant correlations (see Table 1):

- a negative correlation between Evaluative Concerns (the maladaptive side of perfectionism) and Psychological Wellbeing ($r = -.45$, $p = .01$);
- a positive correlation between Psychological Wellbeing and academic performance ($r = .22$, $p = .01$).

Table 1. Correlations

	S	EC	PWB	AP
S	1.000			
EC	.154**	1.000		
PWB	.090	-.452**	1.000	
AP	.024	-.044	.220**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

S – Striving, EC – Evaluative Concerns, PWB – Psychological Wellbeing, AP – Academic performance

Student' grade average varies from 6 to 10 ($M=8.66$, $SD=.91$). 21 (5.8%) students didn't report their grade average.

We can conclude that one of the study hypothesis (H1 There is a negative correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and psychological wellbeing) is confirmed. Regarding the second research hypothesis (H2 There is a positive correlation between adaptive perfectionism and academic performance), we cannot reject the null hypothesis.

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to evaluate the relationships between university students' perfectionism, psychological wellbeing and academic performance. Our results from 362 students indicate a moderate and negative correlation between the maladaptive dimension of perfectionism (Evaluative concerns) and psychological wellbeing and a small and positive correlation between psychological wellbeing and academic performance.

The relationship between Evaluative concern and psychological wellbeing indicates that higher levels of negative or maladaptive perfectionism are associated with lower levels of psychological wellbeing. Perfectionism can generate stress, negative affect and avoidant coping, resulting from the tendency to make rigorous evaluations and from focusing on the negative aspects of your work or performance (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This stress is associated with decreased psychological wellbeing. The

perfectionist's all-or nothing mindset and the fear of making a mistake lead to a predisposition to psychological problems and poor positive psychological functioning (Lee et al., 2020).

Fernández-García et al. (2022), investigating academic perfectionism, psychological wellbeing, and suicidal ideation in college students, identified a relation between high levels of perfectionism and the pressure to which students are subjected and worse mental health states.

Given the well-documented implications of maladaptive side of perfectionism on personal adjustment and outcomes, teachers can lower the pressure on students, stressing that mistakes are a normal part of the learning process, helping students to set realistic goals for themselves, explaining the negative outcomes of maladaptive perfectionism, creating a collaborative and friendly learning context, stressing the importance of thinking in terms of making progress from where one is now rather than in terms of comparing oneself with peers.

The weak, positive relationship between psychological wellbeing and academic performance indicate that positive functioning is to a certain degree important in obtaining efficiency. The association between psychological wellbeing and academic performance can be explained by Self-Determination Theory elaborated by Deci and Ryan (2012). This theory of motivation argues that humans have fundamental psychological needs to be competent, autonomous, and related to others. When these needs are fulfilled, people motivation, willingness, sense of wellbeing, and performance will improve, resulting in greater academic engagement and achievement. Consistent to this explanation, Stanton et al. (2016), in a qualitative study on students' lived experiences of well-being in learning environments, identified several pathways through which learning experiences contribute to student well-being. Their findings show that experiences of social connection, flexibility and learning for purpose may contribute to happiness, satisfaction, deep learning and engagement among students.

Our results are consistent with those of other studies. A meta-analysis on 81 studies, involving 54,426 participants, by Kaya and Erdem (2021), revealed an overall mean effect size of the relationship between students' well-being and their academic achievement of .17. Their findings indicated that students tend to perform better academically as their well-being increases and vice versa, but the magnitude of this relationship is small. Bückner et al. (2018) reported similar results: the correlation between academic achievement and subjective wellbeing was small to medium in magnitude and statistically significant at $r = 0.164$.

A systematic review on the relationship between psychological wellbeing and academic performance indicates that results are inconsistent, identifying both positive association, no association or conflicting results. The lack of consistency in research results in this area indicates a need for future research into more specific aspects of well-being and academic achievement, preferably using longitudinal study designs (Amholt et al., 2020). Högborg (2023) found that country-level academic achievement is only weakly and inconsistently related with wellbeing.

Education has several goals. The main purpose of higher education is to train future professionals. From a student point of view, the quality of this training is measured by grades, an individual indicator of academic performance. But universities are also interested in their student's wellbeing, offering health and counselling services, opportunities for recreational and social activities, in order to increase students' quality of and the satisfaction with academic life. Alongside difficulties in family and personal life, students have to manage difficult periods in their academic life (adjusting to a new learning environment, new colleagues and teachers, many materials to study, competition, final exams etc.), which can become burdens to their health, wellbeing and success.

Psychological counselling services provided in the universities could focus on improving students' well-being, policy makers could design a curriculum to highlight students' well-being, motivation,

and contextual factors contributing to learning, as opposed to focusing only on knowledge and cognitive abilities, and teachers could create a learning environment fostering students' academic progress, as well as their psychological wellbeing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our study identified significant relations between perfectionism, psychological wellbeing and academic performance in university students. These findings have practical implications for higher education teachers and for university policy makers. Although the main objective in higher education is to shape professional competencies, university services and teachers should also consider students' psychological wellbeing.

Limitations. The main limitation of this study is the small study sample. The second one is the fact that the sample is not balanced according to gender and university major criteria, the majority of the students are females and study in Social Sciences areas. The third limitation is related to data collection on academic performance. Students were asked to report their grade average for the last term and some of them didn't report an exact value, but an approximation, while others (5.8%) didn't report any value.

Future research could investigate other individual and contextual factors (like social support within the universities) in relation to students' wellbeing and academic performance.

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