

Research Paper

Perfectionism as Imposed by Family and Fear of Intimacy among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Perfectionism is defined as 'the practice of demanding of oneself or others a higher quality of performance than is required by the situation' (Hollender, 1965). Intimacy can be defined as 'relational event in which trusting self-disclosure is responded to with communicated empathy' (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994). Halgin and Leahy (1989) said that perfectionists 'avoid intimate relationships because they fear that becoming open to others would result in vulnerability, derision, and ultimate rejection'. This study aims to establish the relationship between perfectionism as imposed by family and fear of intimacy among young adults. The sample size (N) is 80 between the age 18 and 30 years. Family Almost Perfect Scale developed by Wang K. T. (2010) will be used to measure individual's perceptions of the attitudes, beliefs, and values one's family has and conveyed to them. The fear of Intimacy will be measured using Fear of Intimacy scale developed by Michelle D. Sherman, Mark H & Thelen (1996). One-way Anova was used to assess the degree of relationship between perfectionism and fear of intimacy. The p value was found to be 0.037 at 0.05 level of significance. Results showed that the non-perfectionists had increased fear of intimacy and the fear of intimacy was high in people who were not in romantic relationship.

Keywords: *Perfectionism, Fear of Intimacy, Young adults.*

Perfectionism

Flett and Hewitt (2002) defined perfectionism as a personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards for performance accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations. Even though perfectionism may come from different sources, families are powerful influences in transmitting perfectionist values and behaviours. Brennan (1995) found that children of perfectionistic parents report poorer attachment relationship with their parents and are afraid of abandonment by others.

Several variables have been implicated in the transmission of perfectionism within families. One important variable that affects the transmission of perfectionism is the level of discrepancy the child feels between his or her family's high expectations and the child's

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actual performance (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001; Wang, 2010). If a child feels a high level of discrepancy between what is expected by family and the child's own perception of his or her performance, psychological distress may result. This distress may manifest in the form of emotional difficulties such as poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and even suicide ideation.

Theoretical models explaining family imposed perfectionism

Flett and Hewitt (2002) explain different theoretical models that explain why and how perfectionism is transmitted through families.

Social learning model.

The social learning model posits that children and adolescents develop perfectionist thinking and behaviour through imitation, particularly from perfectionist behaviors they observe in their parents. In addition, imitation of parents' perfectionism appears to follow a pattern in which children imitate the corresponding dimension of perfectionism of the same-sex parent and children imitate the dimension of perfectionism their parents display (Flett, Hewitt, et al., 2002).

Social expectations model.

In contrast, the social expectations model posits that perfectionism develops because children can receive approval from parents only when they are high achieving. In these contexts, children are particularly at risk of experiencing feelings of helplessness and hopelessness when they do not reach parents' unrealistically high expectations. Feedback appears to be an influential process for these children because parental approval is contingent on receiving positive feedback. These strivings for positive feedback can be detrimental for children, because they are likely to receive inaccurate and negative feedback from parents, regardless of their performance (Flett, Hewitt, et al., 2002).

Social reaction model.

The social reaction model proposes that perfectionism develops as a result of exposure to a harsh environment, including physically abusive situations, psychological maltreatment (e.g., love withdrawal, using shame-based discipline), and/or chaotic family environments. In these situations, Flett, Hewitt, et al. (2002) have suggested that children adopt perfectionist behaviors as a type of coping strategy to traumatizing and adverse circumstances and these behaviors may have interrelated goals. One goal may be to escape or reduce abusive behaviors or avoid being exposed to shame and humiliation. Another goal of adopting perfectionistic behavior in these situations may be to assert control and create predictability in an environment that is inconsistent and unpredictable. Importantly, Flett, Hewitt, et al. (2002) have suggested that although there is significant overlap between the social expectations model and social reaction model, what differentiates the social reaction model is the element of harshness. Indeed, some families may have high expectations without accompanying punitive and harsh tendencies (i.e., the social expectations model).

Anxious rearing model.

The anxious rearing model proposes that perfectionism results from exposure to highly anxious parents who are overly concerned with the negative consequences of making mistakes. These parents may constantly remind children to be careful about making mistakes and about how others might judge them if they do make a mistake. This type of parenting leads children to adopt a future-oriented perspective, engaging in perfectionist behavior that helps protect them from the negative consequences of future mistakes (Flett et al., 2002).

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Overprotective and evaluation-driven behaviors by parents are also related to anxious cognitions and anxiety-related difficulties for children, such as separation anxiety, social phobia, and general anxiety (Gruner, Muris, & Merckelbach, 1999).

Preliminary integrative model.

Finally, the most comprehensive model of perfectionism to date suggests an integrative conceptualization that provides insight into the personal (e.g., temperament, attachment style), parental (e.g., personality, goals, parenting practices, parenting style), and contextual (e.g., culture, peer relationships, the child's teachers) factors that influence the development of perfectionism and ongoing factors that contribute to the pressure to be perfect (Flett, Hewitt, et al., 2002). This preliminary model has made a critical contribution to the literature on perfectionism. Its integration of child, parent, and environmental factors creates a holistic and balanced perspective on the influences that undergird and perpetuate perfectionism. Importantly, this model emphasizes the interpersonal nature of perfectionism by illustrating how important relationships across multiple contexts in a child's life influence the pressure to be perfect (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Dimensions of perfectionism

Perfectionism necessarily involves holding extremely high standards for personal performance. However, factor analytic studies of several popular measures of perfectionism reveal two underlying factors that add to the complexity of the perfectionism construct: the first has been labeled positive striving, whereas the second reflects maladaptive evaluation concerns (Frost et al., 1993; Slaney, Rice, & Ashby, 2002). Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, and Ashby (2001) employed these factors to identify adaptive and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism. In their view, adaptive perfectionists demonstrate positive striving but do not evidence the negative evaluation concerns that plague maladaptive perfectionists. In essence, adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists share similarly high standards for their own performance, but maladaptive perfectionists are consistently and harshly self-critical in their appraisal of their performance in light of those standards.

Intimacy

Dandeneau and Johnson (1994) defined intimacy as a relational event in which trusting self-disclosure is responded to with communicated empathy. Self-disclosure may increase one's sense of vulnerability, but to achieve intimacy, individuals must necessarily risk revealing their vulnerabilities to another person (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). Those who fear vulnerability will likely fear intimacy as well and as a result, they may experience greater difficulty in their important relationships.

According to Erikson's (1980) psychosocial theory of development, the achievement of intimacy is the major task of early adulthood. Intimacy entails "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships" (Sternberg, 1997, p. 315) and is related to both psychological and physiological health (Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003).

Researchers have noted that satisfying, relational intimacy is an important source of happiness and meaning in one's life (Bartholomew, 1990) and intimacy has been associated with creativity, productivity, emotional regulation, contentment, and well-being (Hook et al., 2003). An impaired ability to form intimate relationships, in contrast, appears to be antithetical to well-being (Thelen, Vander Wal, Muir-Thomas, & Harmon, 2000). For instance, individuals who have difficulty forming intimate relationships appear to have lower

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self-esteem (Descutner & Thelen, 1991), as well as higher levels of stress, illness, depression, and greater mortality rates compared to those who successfully develop intimate relationships (Hook et al., 2003).

The impediment or inability to form and/or maintain intimate relationships often occurs because of a fear of intimacy, which is defined as the inability to share one's thoughts and feelings with another significantly valued individual (Descutner & Thelen, 1991; Thelen et al., 2000). Therefore, fear of intimacy, through its effects, is generally incompatible with personal well-being.

Perfectionism and intimacy

Like a fear of intimacy, negative forms of perfectionism have been linked to enduring problems in relationships. Halgin and Leahy (1989) argued that perfectionists “avoid intimate relationships because they fear that becoming open to others would result in vulnerability, derision, and ultimate rejection” (p. 223). Burns (1983) wrote that “because perfectionists believe that they must be flawless to be loved and accepted, they fear sharing feelings and disclosing inadequacies” (p. 221).

Erikson's (1963) early adulthood challenge of developing intimacy or suffering isolation. Because a fear of intimacy may not only impair the quality of close relationships but also may hinder their formation.

Need for the study

Though there are studies conducted on fear of intimacy and perfectionism individually, there are very few studies focusing on the family influenced perfectionism's effect on the fear of intimacy in an individual. As the technology develops, the pattern of forming an attachment with people changes. It affects the relationship patterns. As the relationship pattern changes, the level of intimacy an individual develops with the other person also changes. Sometimes, the maladaptive level of intimacy can cause harm to other relationships too. Thus, it is necessary to address to the influence of perfectionism as imposed by family on the fear of intimacy of young adults.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To establish the relationship between perfectionism as imposed by family and fear of intimacy among young adults.

Research Questions

- Whether there is a relationship between perfectionism as imposed by family and fear of intimacy among young adults?
- Whether there is an increase in the level of fear of intimacy for maladaptive perfectionists?
- Whether non-perfectionists have lower level of fear of intimacy?

Objectives

- To determine the relationship between perfectionism as imposed by family and fear of intimacy among young adults.
- To observe the difference between perfectionism and fear of intimacy in young adults in romantic relationship and young adults who are not in romantic relationship.

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- To observe whether maladaptive perfectionism affects intimacy.

Hypothesis

H1- There is a significant effect of perfectionism as imposed by family on fear of intimacy among young adults.

Research Design

Ex-post facto research design was used. The survey method of research was used to gather the data using the tools. The sample was randomly selected using snowball technique where the participants recruit their acquaintances for the study.

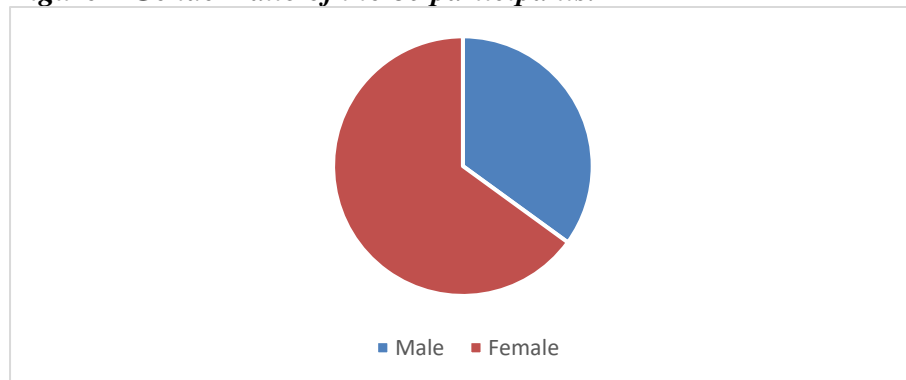
Procedure

A Google form that contained Family almost perfect scale (Wang, 2010) and Fear of intimacy scale (Michelle, Mark & Thelen, 1996) was generated and circulated. A total of 80 responses were collected.

Sample

The sample size selected for this study was 80 (N=80). There were 28 male and 52 female. All the participants were from 18 to 30 years of age. The average age of the sample was observed to 22.97. The respondents were college going students and those who were not married.

Figure 1 Gender ratio of the 80 participants.



Variables

Independent variable – perfectionism as imposed by family

Dependent variable – fear of intimacy

Tools used

- **Family Almost Perfect Scale (Wang, T. K., 2010)** – It is a self-report inventory containing 17 items designed to measure adaptive and maladaptive components of perfectionism imposed by family. Participants respond the items using a 7 point likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The instrument consists of three subscales: Family standards, Family order and family discrepancy. Cronbach's coefficient alphas ranging from .83 for the 7-item Standards subscale to .92 for the 12-item Discrepancy subscale. Cronbach's coefficient alphas for this sample were .91 for Standards and .96 for Discrepancy.
- **Fear of Intimacy Scale (Michelle, Mark & Thelen, 1996)** – It is a 35 item measure that was designed to assess the fear of intimacy in a close relationship or at the

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prospect of a close relationship. Participants respond to the items using 5 point likert-type scale ranging from 1(not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (extremely characteristic of me). The provided evidence for the validity of the scale with a college-age sample based on convergence with similar measures and therapists' subjective ratings of their clients' fear of intimacy. They reported 1-month test-retest reliability for the scale of .89 and a coefficient alpha of .93. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha for this sample was .90.

Statistical Analysis

In this study, Microsoft excel and Social science statistics calculator was used to conduct data analysis. The descriptive statistics was used to calculate the mean, standard deviation of the scores obtained. One way analysis of variances was used to calculate the f value and p value in order to calculate the differences between the variables. The alpha was set at 0.05 level.

Ethical consideration

The participants were informed about the study. Every participant filled the form voluntarily.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Family Almost Perfect Scale Means and Standard Deviations by Cluster

FAPS subscale	Cluster 1 Maladaptive Perfectionists (n=30)		Cluster 2 Adaptive Perfectionists (n=42)		Cluster 3 Non-perfectionists (n=8)		F
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Family Standards	34.55	5.41	30.26	6.54	16.25	2.96	35.09
Family Discrepancies	35.41	6.63	17.3	5.45	15.25	4.53	94.42

Note: FAPS is Family Almost Perfect Scale

From the sample (n=80), 30 were found to be maladaptive perfectionists, 42 were found to be adaptive perfectionists and 8 were found to be non-perfectionists. One way analyses of variance revealed significant differences in the family standards and family discrepancies obtained by the groups ($p < .05$). The family standards and family discrepancies are high in maladaptive perfectionists. The family standards is high and family discrepancies is low in adaptive perfectionists. The family standards and family discrepancies is low in non-perfectionists.

Table 2 Fear of Intimacy Means and Standard Deviation by cluster

Fear of intimacy	Cluster 1 Maladaptive Perfectionists (n=30)		Cluster 2 Adaptive Perfectionists (n=42)		Cluster 3 Non-perfectionists (n=8)		F	P
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
	92.62	21.81	79.4	24.27	93.5	11.82	3.44	0.037*

**significant at 0.05 level*

Mean group scores of each cluster was included in a one-way analysis of variance to compare fear of intimacy scores for three identified clusters. Results indicated that the adaptive, maladaptive and non-perfectionists clusters differed significantly on the fear of intimacy scale. ($F = 3.44$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$).

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The objective of this study was to investigate the association between perfectionism and fear of intimacy in young adults. The p value of 0.037 is lesser than 0.05 which show that there is a relationship between fear of intimacy and perfectionism. The results show that mean of fear of intimacy is higher in non-perfectionists than the mean fear of intimacy in maladaptive perfectionists. This is contradicting the earlier studies which say that maladaptive perfectionists have increased fear of intimacy (Matin and Ashby, 2014). One of the characteristics of non-perfectionists is to handle relationships poorly and being disorganized. This characteristic could affect the intimacy level in relationships thus showing higher level of fear of intimacy among them.

Table 3 Difference of Mean of fear of intimacy and Percentages of each cluster for participants in romantic relationship and participants not in romantic relationship

	In romantic relationship (n=19)	Not in a romantic relationship (n=61)
Mean of Fear of intimacy	74.95	91.74
Maladaptive perfectionists	Frequency	30
	Percentage	49.18%
Adaptive perfectionists	Frequency	24
	Percentage	39.34%
Non-perfectionists	Frequency	7
	Percentage	11.48%

The above table shows that those in romantic relationship have low fear of intimacy than those in romantic relationship. The percentage of maladaptive perfectionists in romantic relationship is more than those not in romantic relationship. The fear of intimacy in individual could have lead them to not involve in romantic relationships or vice versa. The characteristics of people with fear of intimacy is that they shy away from personal connections thus they do not involve in romantic relationships.

Summary

The study aimed to find the relationship between fear of intimacy and perfectionism. There were 80 participants of which 28 were male and 52 were female and 19 were in a romantic relationship and 61 were not in a romantic relationship. Fear of intimacy scale and Family almost perfect scale was used to measure the fear of intimacy and perfectionism respectively. Results show that fear of intimacy is higher in non-perfectionists than maladaptive perfectionists and adaptive perfectionists. The fear of intimacy is higher in group not in romantic relationship.

CONCLUSION

There is a relationship between perfectionism and fear of intimacy. The non-perfectionists have high fear of intimacy than maladaptive and adaptive perfectionists. The Fear of intimacy is higher in maladaptive perfectionists than adaptive perfectionists. The fear of intimacy is high in those not in romantic relationship.

Limitations

The sample size was smaller thus the number of participants in each cluster were smaller. Post hoc tests was not done to find the within group comparison.

Implications and Future directions

Participants with maladaptive perfectionism and increased fear of intimacy can be identified and given intervention. The research can be carried out with larger sample size.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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