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Perfectionism in students and positive career planning attitudes

Joachim Stoeber [a,*], Sofia Mutinelli [b], Philip J. Corr [b]

[a] School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom
[b] Department of Psychology, City University London, London, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

In today's uncertain job market, university students who show positive attitudes in their career planning have an advantage. Yet, we know little what personality characteristics are associated with individual differences in career planning attitudes. The present study examined 177 university students to investigate whether perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed) predicted students' positive career planning attitudes (career adaptability, career optimism, and perceived knowledge of the job market). Results from multiple regressions showed that perfectionism explained 8–12% variance in career planning attitudes with (a) self-oriented perfectionism positively predicting career adaptability and career optimism, (b) other-oriented perfectionism positively predicting perceived knowledge, and (c) socially prescribed perfectionism negatively predicting career adaptability. The findings suggest that perfectionism is a personality characteristic that may both underpin and undermine students' positive attitudes towards career planning.

1. Introduction

Career planning in the first decades of the 21st century is characterized by unpredictability, and the general economic malaise of the past decade has contributed to pessimism and discouragement, especially among young people (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011). Consequently, positive attitudes play an important role in modern-day career planning, relating to adapting to the complex job market, being aware and having knowledge of it, as well as holding a positive disposition in the form of optimism (Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005). Research has shown that there are individual differences in young people's attitudes towards career planning (e.g., Rogers, Creed, & Ian Glendon, 2008; Karavdic & Baumann, 2014), but little is known about which personality dispositions may explain these differences. The present research examines whether perfectionism is a disposition that may explain individual differences in students' career planning attitudes.

1.1. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality disposition characterized by exceedingly high standards of performance and evaluative concerns about the personal and social consequences of not living up to them (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Over the past 25 years, two different models have dominated perfectionism research: Frost et al.'s (1990) and Hewitt and Flett's (1991). Frost et al.'s model differentiates six dimensions: personal standards, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, parental criticism, and organization. Hewitt and Flett's model differentiates three: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are personally important. Other-oriented perfectionism reflects beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. And socially prescribed perfectionism reflects beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important to others. Factor analytic studies have shown that the different dimensions of the two models form two higher-order dimensions (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). The first was originally described as "positive striving perfectionism" (combining personal standards, organization, self-oriented, and other-oriented perfectionism) and the second as "maladaptive evaluation concerns perfectionism" (combining concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations and criticism, and socially prescribed perfectionism). However, because positivity and maladaptiveness are empirical questions and should not be assumed, the two dimensions are better described as "personal standards perfectionism" (PSP) and "evaluative concerns perfectionism" (ECP; Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010).

1.2. Perfectionism and career planning attitudes

A number of studies have investigated perfectionism and students' career planning attitudes. Their findings indicate that PSP shows positive relationships with positive attitudes (or negative relationships with negative attitudes) whereas ECP shows positive relationships with negative attitudes. Page, Bruch, and Haase (2008), for example, found that PSP (combining personal standards and self-oriented perfectionism) showed

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NP, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: J.Stoeber@kent.ac.uk (J. Stoeber).

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a positive relationship with self-efficacy in career decision making, whereas ECP (combining concern over mistakes, socially prescribed perfectionism) showed a negative relationship. Instead, ECP showed a positive correlation with early vocational commitment: Young people high in ECP were more likely to make an early commitment to vocational choices and were less exploratory than young people low in ECP. Furthermore, Lehmann and Konstam (2011) found that ECP (combining concern over mistakes and doubts about actions) showed a positive relationship with difficulties in career decision-making. Finally, Andrews, Bullock-Yowell, Dahlen, and Nicholson (2014) found that ECP (combining concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, and parental criticism) showed a positive relationship with negative career thoughts (e.g., "I'll never understand enough about occupations to make a good choice"). In contrast, PSP (combining personal standards and organization) showed a negative relationship. In sum, students high in PSP tend to show positive career planning attitudes indicating that they are flexible and well-adapted to the modern-day career market whereas students high in ECP tend to lack these attitudes or show negative attitudes.

1.3. Limitations and open questions

Whereas the above studies' findings are consistent, they have limitations and leave unanswered certain questions. First, the number of studies is very small, and they have mainly focused on negative attitudes (early vocational commitment, difficulties in career planning, negative career thoughts). Consequently further research is required, particularly research looking at positive career planning attitudes. Second, there is one dimension of perfectionism that has been neglected: other-oriented perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). A potential reason is that other-oriented perfectionism captures personal standards, but personal standards for others. People high in other-oriented perfectionism do not expect to be perfect. They expect *others* to be perfect. Consequently, researchers are uncomfortable with including other-oriented perfectionism in composite measures of PSP (Stoeber & Otto, 2006), even though it shows high loadings on the PSP factor (Bieling et al., 2004; Frost et al., 1993). Instead, other-oriented perfectionism is better investigated separately, particularly as recent studies (e.g., Stoeber, 2014) revealed, it showed a unique pattern of relationships that was markedly different from those of self-oriented perfectionism (representing PSP) and socially prescribed perfectionism (representing ECP).

1.4. The present study

Against this background, the aim of our study was to examine further the relationships of perfectionism and students' career planning attitudes addressing the limitations of previous studies. First, we focused on positive attitudes. According to Rottinghaus et al. (2005), positive career planning attitudes have three aspects: *career adaptability*, reflecting an ability of coping with unexpected events, adapting to a continuously changing working environment, and exploiting changes as means to succeed; *career optimism*, reflecting a proneness to maintain positive expectations and beliefs that all circumstances can evolve in the best possible outcome; and *perceived knowledge*, reflecting an awareness and understanding of the job market. Second, we used Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of perfectionism and examined self-oriented perfectionism (representing PSP), socially prescribed perfectionism (representing ECP), and other-oriented perfectionism (as a separate dimension).

Based on previous research on perfectionism and career planning attitudes (see Section 1.2), we had the following expectations. On the basis that self- and other-oriented perfectionism are dimensions of perfectionism associated with PSP, and other dimensions associated with PSP have shown positive relationships with career planning attitudes, we expected self- and other-oriented perfectionism to show positive relationships with the three aspects (career adaptability, career optimism, perceived knowledge). In contrast, as socially prescribed perfectionism is a dimension of perfectionism associated with ECP, and other dimensions of perfectionism associated with ECP have shown negative relationships with career planning attitudes, we expected socially prescribed perfectionism to show negative relationships with the three aspects.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 177 university students (77 men, 100 women) was recruited via an internet-based recruiting system (SONA) at City University London and in the University's libraries. Mean age of participants was 21.6 years ($SD = 3.2$; range = 18–30 years); and 59% classified themselves as White European, 30% as Asian, 5% as Black African/American, and 6% as "other."

2.2. Measures

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 2004) was used to measure self-oriented perfectionism (15 items; "I demand nothing less than perfection of myself"), other-oriented perfectionism (15 items; "If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly"), and socially prescribed perfectionism (15 items; "People expect nothing less than perfection from me"). Items were presented with the MPS's standard instruction ("Listed below are a number of statements concerning personal characteristics and traits…"), and participants responded on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

The Career Futures Inventory (CFI; Rottinghaus et al., 2005) was used to measure the three aspects of positive career planning attitudes: career adaptability (11 items; e.g., "I can adapt to change in my career plans"), career optimism (11 items; "I get excited when I think about my career"), and perceived knowledge (3 items; "I am good at understanding job market trends"). Participants were asked to what degree they agreed with each item and responded on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

2.3. Data screening

Because multivariate outliers distort the results of correlation and regression analyses, one female participant was excluded showing a Mahalanobis distance larger than the critical value of $\chi^2(6) = 22.46$, $p < .001$ (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). With this, the final sample comprised 176 participants. Next, we examined whether the variance–covariance matrices of male and female participants differed by computing a Box's M test with gender as between-participants factor. The test was nonsignificant ($p = .398$), so all analyses were collapsed across gender. Finally, the reliability of the measures was examined, and all showed satisfactory Cronbach's alphas >.70 except other-oriented perfectionism which showed a near-satisfactory alpha of .69 (see Table 1).

3. Results

3.1. Bivariate correlations

First, we examined the bivariate correlations (see Table 1). As expected, self-oriented perfectionism showed positive correlations with all three aspects of positive career planning attitudes. In comparison, other-oriented perfectionism showed positive correlations only with two aspects: career optimism and perceived knowledge. Unexpectedly, socially prescribed perfectionism did not show significant negative correlations with any aspect.

Table 1
Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Perfectionism						
1. Self-oriented perfectionism						
3. Other-oriented perfectionism	.52***					
2. Socially prescribed perfectionism	.46***	.38***				
Career planning attitudes						
4. Career adaptability	.27***	.13	−.07			
5. Career optimism	.30***	.19*	.07	.37***		
6. Perceived knowledge	.17*	.28***	.11	.37***	.43***	
M	4.77	4.00	3.79	3.88	3.39	2.94
SD	1.04	0.71	0.74	0.49	0.72	0.99
Cronbach's alpha	.88	.69	.77	.76	.82	.81

Note. $N = 176$ university students. Variables were computed by averaging item responses.
* $p < .05$.
*** $p < .001$.

3.2. Multiple regressions

Because the three perfectionism dimensions showed medium- to large-sized positive correlations (see again Table 1), we computed a series of multiple regressions to investigate their unique relationships with the three aspects of positive planning attitudes controlling for the dimensions' overlap. In all regressions, the three perfectionism dimensions were entered simultaneously (see Table 2). As expected from previous research (e.g., Stoeber, 2014), the three dimensions showed different unique relationships. Self-oriented perfectionism showed a positive relationship with career adaptability and career optimism, but not perceived knowledge. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism showed a positive relationship with perceived knowledge, but not career adaptability and career optimism. Furthermore, socially prescribed perfectionism showed a negative relationship with career adaptability. Overall, perfectionism explained 8–12% of variance in students' career planning attitudes.

4. Discussion

4.1. The present findings

The aim of the present study was to examine the relationships of three perfectionism dimensions (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed) and three aspects of students' positive career planning attitudes (career adaptability, career optimism, and perceived knowledge of the job market). As expected, the three perfectionism dimensions showed a differential pattern of relationships. Self-oriented perfectionism showed positive relationships with all three aspects, but only the positive relationships with career adaptability and career optimism represented unique relationships not shared with the other perfectionism dimensions. In comparison, other-oriented perfectionism showed positive relationships only with career optimism and perceived knowledge, and only the positive relationship with perceived knowledge represented a unique relationship.

The positive relationships that self-oriented perfectionism showed with positive career planning attitudes corroborate previous findings that perfectionism dimensions associated with personal standards perfectionism (PSP) show positive relationships with attitudes and characteristics that are functional for students' career planning. If the positive relationship that other-oriented perfectionism showed with perceived knowledge should be interpreted in the same way, however, is unclear. Because other-oriented perfectionism is associated with grandiose narcissism (Stoeber, 2014; Stoeber, Sherry, & Nealis, 2015), the positive relationships could also reflect an inflated sense of the self and a "know-it-all" attitude that may be dysfunctional.

In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism showed a unique negative relationship with career adaptability. Because the negative relationship was not evident in the bivariate correlations, we assume the presence of a suppressor effect whereby the positive relationships that self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism showed with career planning attitudes "masked" the negative relationship of socially prescribed perfectionism with career adaptability, so it emerged only when the overlap with self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism was controlled statistically. This finding demonstrates that the positive relationships that perfectionism dimensions associated with PSP have with indicators of psychological adjustment can suppress the negative relationships that perfectionism dimensions associated with ECP have (cf. Hill, Huelsman, & Araujo, 2010). Moreover, note that the unique negative relationship that socially prescribed perfectionism showed with career adaptability was expected and dovetails with Page et al.'s (2008) finding that ECP showed a positive correlation with vocational commitment indicating that students high in ECP are less flexible in their vocational choices and less willing to adapt their career plans than students low in ECP.

4.2. Limitations and future studies

The present study has a number of limitations. First, the study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. Consequently, the multiple regressions indicating that perfectionism predicted career planning attitudes should not be interpreted in a causal or temporal fashion. Second, whereas we expected self- and other-oriented perfectionism to show positive relationships with career planning, and socially prescribed perfectionism to show negative relationships, the exact pattern of positive and negative relationships we found in the multiple regressions was not predicted. These findings must await replication and extension to consider actual career-related decisions, choices, and behavior. Third, our study focused on positive career planning attitudes and Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of perfectionism. Future studies may want to include negative attitudes and also examine models of perfectionism that include other-oriented perfectionism and grandiose narcissism (Nealis, Sherry, Lee-Baggley, Stewart, & Macneil, in press).

Table 2
Multiple regressions of perfectionism predicting career planning attitudes.

	Perfectionism			
	Self-oriented perfectionism	Other-oriented perfectionism	Socially prescribed perfectionism	
Career planning attitudes	β	β	β	R^2
Career adaptability	.37***	.03	−.26**	.12***
Career optimism	.31***	.07	−.10	.10***
Perceived knowledge	.04	.26**	−.01	.08**

Note. $N = 176$ university students. β = standardized regression coefficient. $R^2 \times 100$ = % variance explained.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

4.3. Conclusions

This is the first empirical study to explore the relationships between multidimensional perfectionism and students' career planning attitudes including other-oriented perfectionism and focusing on positive attitudes and their different aspects. The findings are clear and corroborate that perfectionism is a personality disposition that may explain individual differences in students' career planning attitudes. Moreover, the findings expand on previous findings by indicating that all dimensions of perfectionism capturing exceedingly high standards of performance—whether for oneself (self-oriented perfectionism) or for others (other-oriented perfectionism)—show positive relationships with positive career planning attitudes. In contrast, dimension of perfectionism capturing evaluative concerns about the social consequences of not living up to these standards (socially prescribed perfectionism) show negative relationships with attitudes reflecting flexibility and adaptability in career planning that are so important in today's uncertain job market.

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