Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Hill, Andrew P. and Curran, Thomas (2019) A case for multiple pathways to increasing perfectionism: A response to Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2018). Psychological Bulletin, 145 (4). pp. 433-435.

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/3737/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bul0000189

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

A case for multiple pathways to increasing perfectionism: A response to Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2018)

Andrew P. Hill[1] & Thomas Curran[2]

York St John University, UK [1].

University of Bath, UK [2]

Accepted 04/01/2019, *Psychological Bulletin*.

Author Notes

Andrew P. Hill, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, York St John University, UK; Thomas Curran, Centre for Motivation and Health Behaviour Change, Department for Health, University of Bath, UK.

Address correspondence to Thomas Curran, Department for Health, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK; E-mail: t.curran@bath.ac.uk.

Abstract

We respond to Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2018) commentary on our meta-analysis that evidenced increases in college students' perfectionism from 1989 to 2016. In speculating on possible reasons for the increase, we argued that increases in anxious and controlling parenting could partly account for this trend. Soenens and Vansteenkiste argue that in doing so we did not differentiate between parental control-as-structure and parental control-as-pressure, with only the latter being important for the development of perfectionism. They also argue that when this distinction is made, research suggests that parental control-as-pressure is decreasing. Finally, they caution for the risk of parent blame. In our response, we acknowledge the potential importance of the distinction between parental control-as-structure and parental control-as-pressure but note that so far this distinction has not been common in perfectionism research. We also acknowledge that the evidence provided by Soenens and Vansteenkiste could be suggestive of declining control-as-pressure. However, we highlight that our arguments hinged on a wider array of evidence that placed changes in parental behaviour in context of broader social change and multiple pathways to increases in perfectionism. We close our response by agreeing that parents are not to blame for increasing perfectionism.

We thank Soenens and Vansteenkiste for their thoughts on our meta-analysis documenting generational differences in perfectionism and their perspective on the likely role of parental behaviour. We also welcome the opportunity to respond to the concerns they raised. A summary of each of their concerns and our responses are provided below.

Commentary provided by Soenens and Vansteenkiste

Soenens and Vansteenkiste highlighted two main concerns about our study and offered one cautionary note. First, in speculating that perfectionism may be increasing because anxious and controlling parental behaviour is increasing, Soenens and Vansteenkiste argue that we did not distinguish between parental control-as-structure and parental control-as pressure, and this is problematic because only the latter is important to the development of perfectionism. Second, they contend that once the distinction between parental control-as-structure and parental control-as pressure is made, research shows that parental control-as-pressure is decreasing, not increasing. On this basis, Soenens and Vansteenkiste argued that it is premature to hold parents responsible for increases in perfectionism.

Control-as-pressure versus control-as-structure

Regarding the first issue, Soenens and Vansteenkiste highlight a key distinction between two different types of parental control. We encourage researchers to consider the differences between the two types of parental control when examining the development of perfectionism and factors that contribute to the rise in perfectionism. We did not explicitly state the type of parental control that we considered important (we described it only as overly anxious and controlling parenting). This omission was not a deliberate oversight. Rather, it simply reflected how psychological control is typically discussed in perfectionism research. Specifically, parental control is typically regarded as synonymous with an array of psychologically controlling behaviours inclusive of parental control-as-pressure (e.g., authoritarianism, conditional regard, and harshness; Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Macdonald,

2002; Hewitt, Flett, & Makail, 2017). Our omission also reflects how parental control has typically been measured in perfectionism research which focuses on psychological control (i.e., control-as-pressure). As far as we are aware, researchers have included the two aspects of parental control (control-as-pressure and control-as-structure) when examining the development of perfectionism only once (Soenens Vansteenkiste, Luyten, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005).

Parental control-as-pressure on the rise?

Regarding the second issue, Soenens and Vansteenkiste state there is no evidence that parental control-as-pressure is increasing and, with closer scrutiny, it is likely decreasing. Soenens and Vansteenkiste main concern is with our interpretation of Collishaw, Gardner, Maughan, Scott, and Pickles (2012) who found that monitoring and surveillance increased over the last 20 years. We argued that this finding was evidence that anxious and controlling parenting was increasing. By contrast, Soenens and Vansteenkiste argue that rule-setting and monitoring can be communicated in a variety of ways (in a structured or pressurizing manner). In addition, because Collishaw et al. (2012) also found an increase in the amount of quality time spent with parents as well as the degree to which children disclosed information to parents, they argued that the findings more likely indicate an increase in control-as-structure (the type of control purportedly not involved in the development of perfectionism).

We would like to acknowledge that Soenens and Vansteenkiste could be right. And, if Collishaw et al.'s (2012) findings indicate only that control-as-structure is increasing, this might mean that parent practices are not relevant to rising perfectionism. In defence of our position, however, we would like to highlight that we discussed several factors that we thought might explain rising perfectionism. At the broadest level, we charted a path from changes at societal level to changes of parental behaviour and child development that might follow (see Bronfenbrenner, 1989). In particular, we provided evidence of changing cultural

values over the last thirty years towards the establishment of neoliberal ideals of competitive individualism and meritocracy. In addition to placing pressure on young people to strive, achieve, and perfect themselves, we argued that parents might respond by becoming increasingly concerned over their child's successes (and failures), raise their expectations for their children, and become excessively involved in their child's life. In support of these possible changes we provided a large amount of evidence from the US, Canada, and UK including changes in other personality traits, altering values, spending patterns, social media use, educational pressures and attainment, and employment statistics. We believe that the merits of our argument that anxious and controlling parenting is increasing is best considered in context of these wider changes.

That said, the two studies identified by Soenens and Vansteenkiste to be evidence of that parent control-as-pressure is decreasing over time are worth consideration (Ryan, Kalil, Ziol-Guest, & Padilla, 2016; Trifan, Stattin, & Tilton-Weaver, 2014). We could be considered remiss to not to have done so in our meta-analysis. Together Ryan et al. and Trifan et al (2014) provide evidence that physical punishment (e.g., spanking) and authoritarian parenting has decreased over the last 20 years (undermining our argument). However, in considering these trends, it is noteworthy that Collishaw et al (2012) also found that parental expectations have significantly increased over a similar period (supporting our argument). Reconciling these findings is difficult. If we were to speculate, we might suggest that differences in measurement (physical vs psychological control) and context (Sweden vs US) are worthy considerations. It is also notable that the role of parental expectations in the development of perfectionism is much clearer and better understood than the role of physical punishment or authoritarianism, with evidence suggesting that parental expectations predict increases in perfectionism in adolescents over time (e.g., Damian, Stoeber, Negru, & Baban, 2013).

In attempting to link increasing perfectionism with increasingly anxious and overly controlling parents, we might be accused of over-reaching. Yet we signalled at various junctures that, given the non-casual nature of our analyses, our arguments were speculative. More research is clearly required to establish if we have reached too far in our speculation. This work should include a focus on the distinction advocated by Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2018). It should also focus on other ways that parental control can manifest and different pathways through which parents contribute to perfectionism in their children (e.g., social modelling and anxious rearing; Hewitt et al., 2004). In reflecting on whether we should have reached in the first place, it is worth considering how researchers in this area would have reacted if we had not discussed the role of parents. The role of parents in the development of perfectionism has a long history (e.g., Missildine, 1963) and perceptions of parental criticism and expectations are included on instruments that measure perfectionism to reflect their importance (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Indeed, most research that has examined the development of perfectionism has focused on parents. Therefore, we imagine that not speculating on the role of parents would have been viewed as a major omission and would have most likely have drew the ire of other researchers.

Closing comments

Parents are not to blame for the increasing perfectionism we observed for several reasons. They are not to blame because, as Soenens and Vansteenkiste (2018 highlight, research that directly examines changes in parental practices and perfectionism simultaneously in cohort-sequential studies currently does not exist. Parents are also not blame because parenting is exceedingly complex; well-intended actions can have unintended and harmful consequences (see Hewitt et al.'s, 2017, concept of "asynchrony"). Finally, parents are not to blame because, as we speculated, the causes of rising perfectionism likely extend well beyond parents.

References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. In: R. Vasta (Eds), *Six theories of child development: Revised formulations and current issues*(pp. 187-250). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Collishaw, S., Gardner, F., Maughan, B., Scott, J., & Pickles, A. (2012). Do historical changes in parent-child relationships explain increases in youth conduct problems? *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 40*, 119–132. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10802-011-9543-1

Damian, L. E., Stoeber, J., Negru, O., & Băban, A. (2013). On the development of perfectionism in adolescence: Perceived parental expectations predict longitudinal increases in socially prescribed perfectionism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *55*(6), 688-693.

Devin, J. & Navlakha, N. (2010). Social Democracy in Sweden. *Economic and Political Weekly, 45*, 73 –80.

Durrant, J., & Ensom, R. (2012). Physical punishment of children: lessons from 20 years of research. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, *184*(12), 1373-1377.

Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children. (2018). Country Report for Sweden. Retrieved from https://endcorporalpunishment.org/reports-on-every-state-and-territory/sweden/

Grolnick, W. S., & Pomerantz, E. M. (2009). Issues and challenges in studying parental control: Toward a new conceptualization. *Child Development Perspectives*, *3*(3), 165-170.

Hetherington , Marc and Jonathan Weiler . 2009 . *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Hewitt, P. L., Flett, G. L., & Mikail, S. F. (2017). *Perfectionism: A relational approach to conceptualization, assessment, and treatment*. Guilford Publications.

Ramey, G., & Ramey, V. A. (2010). The rug rat race. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Spring*, 129–176. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/eca.2010.0003

Ryan, R. M., Kalil, A., Ziol-Guest, K. M., & Padilla, C. (2016). Socioeconomic gaps in parents' discipline strategies from 1988 to 2011. *Pediatrics, 138*(6), e0720-e0720.

Silk, J. S., Morris, A. S., Kanaya, T., & Steinberg, L. (2003). Psychological control and autonomy granting: Opposite ends of a continuum or distinct constructs? *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *13*, 113–128.

Soenens, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Luyten, P., Duriez, B., & Goossens, L. (2005). Maladaptive perfectionistic self-representations: The mediational link between psychological control and adjustment. *Personality and Individual Differences, 38,* 487-498.

Soenens, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Vandereycken, W., Luyten, P., Sierens, E., & Goossens, L. (2008). Perceived parental psychological control and eating-disordered symptoms: Maladaptive perfectionism as a possible intervening variable. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, *196*(2), 144-152.

Stenner , K. (2005). *The Authoritarian Dynamic* . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Trifan, T. A., Stattin, H., & Tilton-Weaver, L. (2014). Have authoritarian parenting practices and roles changed in the last 50 years? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *76*, 744-761.

Van Der Bruggen, C. O., Stams, G. J. J., & Bögels, S. M. (2008). Research Review: The relation between child and parent anxiety and parental control: a meta-analytic review. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *49*(12), 1257-1269.