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Introducing Perfectionistic Climate

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Abstract

Perfectionism has historically been conceptualised as a personality characteristic – a personal quality of the individual. In this paper, we propose a new conceptualization of perfectionism that focuses on aspects of the social environment that are perfectionistic. Based upon motivational theory, we consider perfectionistic climate to be informational cues and goal structures aligned with the view that performances must be perfect and less than perfect performances are unacceptable. Perfectionistic climate has five components of expectation, criticism, control, conditional regard, and anxiousness. We define and describe each of these components and highlight the similarities and differences between these and existing concepts. We also draw on research that has examined similar concepts to inform our speculation on the possible consequences of perfectionistic climates for the development of perfectionism and its role in intervention work. We believe that the study of perfectionistic climate has the potential to extend perfectionism research considerably and highlights how people can still suffer the consequences of perfectionism through the environment without ever fully internalizing the personal quality themselves.

Key words: perfectionism, personality, social

Introducing Perfectionistic Climate

Perfectionism has many guises or faces (Benson, 2003). However, one of the notable aspects of research examining perfectionism to date is the way perfectionism has been considered exclusively as a characteristic or quality of the individual. Trait models of perfectionism, for instance, have focused on the core aspects of perfectionism that individuals display to identify the degree to which they are perfectionistic. In addition, even extended models of perfectionism, focusing on distinctly cognitive aspects of perfectionism or distinctly interpersonal aspects of perfectionism, have remained within a broad personality framework (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998; Hewitt et al., 2003). With this in mind, it is our view that the study of perfectionism would benefit from additional and alternative perspectives that extend beyond a personality framework.

In order to encourage researchers to adopt an alternative perspective, in this paper we propose a new concept: *perfectionistic climate.* Unlike existing trait and extended models of perfectionism, the concept of perfectionistic climate is not focused on the characteristics or qualities of the individual themselves. Rather, perfectionistic climate is focused on aspects of the social environment and, in particular, aspects of the social environment that are perfectionistic. Our main contention is that perfectionism can be studied from a socio-environmental perspective grounded in objective features of the environment and subjective experiences of the environment. We also assert that by conceiving of perfectionism in this way, we can further our understanding of both the development of perfectionism and its broader effects. Importantly, we will also illustrate how people can still suffer the consequences of perfectionism without ever fully internalizing the personal quality themselves.

We first briefly describe the theoretical basis of perfectionistic climate. In doing so, we define perfectionistic climate and identify its core components. We then summarise what we consider the key implications of introducing this new concept for research and practitioners, before discussing the role of perfectionistic climate in the development of perfectionism, its broader consequences, and importance for intervention work.

Theoretical basis of perfectionistic climate

In defining perfectionistic climate, we reviewed various definitions of achievement climates drawn from Achievements Goal Theory (AGT; Nicholls, 1984, 1989); in particular, the seminal work of Ames (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Ames & Ames, 1984). Having done so, we propose that perfectionistic climate is defined as the informational cues and goal structures (i.e., what people are expected to accomplish and how they are to be evaluated) aligned with the view that performances must be perfect and less than perfect performances are unacceptable. Couching perfectionistic climate within AGT provides a sound theoretical footing for the concept. It also places perfectionistic climate alongside other climates that include information pertinent to how individuals construe success and failure (ego-involving or task-involving climates) and that have been studied in regard to how they are created by significant others such as parents, teachers, coaches, and peers (Ames & Archer, 1988; Seifriz, Duda, & Chi, 1992; White, Duda, & Hart, 1992).

The proposed components of perfectionistic climate are derived from existing models of perfectionism (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), models of the development of perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & Mcdonald, 2002; Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, 2017), and more broadly, from other theoretical models that have been applied to studying the development of perfectionism (Self-Determination Theory, SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In drawing upon existing theoretical models, we aim to strengthen the theoretical basis for

perfectionistic climate and its components. In addition, it also allows us to highlight similarities and differences between existing approaches and our new concept. Finally, as no published research yet exists that has examined perfectionistic climate, drawing on more established approaches means we can inform our speculation regarding the likely effects of perfectionistic climate using existing empirical work.

The first two components of perfectionistic climate are unrealistic expectations that one should perform perfectly (expectation) and harsh criticism when performances are not perfect (criticism). There are several important features to note for these two components. First, we have been purposeful in our focus on "unrealistic" standards as opposed to high, very high, or exceptionally high standards. Unrealistic standards are rigid, exceed what is reasonable or realistic given actual ability or other situational constraints, and are maintained in the face of achievement difficulties or failure. Second, for criticism, we use the term "harsh" to convey that others are critical even of minor, inconsequential mistakes, and despite best effort, personal improvement, or objective success. Essentially, we consider high standards and critical evaluation of performance to be a vital part of most achievement domains, but unrealistic standards and harsh criticism to be unnecessary and perfectionistic.

Expectation and criticism are already evident in perfectionism research in the form of parental expectations and parental criticism (Frost et al., 1990) or parental pressure and coach pressure (Dunn, Causgrove Dunn, & Syrotuik, 2002). The notable difference here from existing approaches to these components is that we consider the two components to be applicable beyond parents and coaches to various significant others (e.g., teachers and peers). We also believe that the two components are best studied independently rather than collapsed into a broader component of pressure. This is because research has found parental expectations and parental criticism have different consequences and interact with each other (McArdle & Duda, 2008). Most importantly, perhaps, we propose that these components

should no longer be studied as core features of trait perfectionism and, instead, are better located in a measure of the degree to which the social environment is perfectionistic. This recommendation reflects their status as antecedents of trait perfectionism as opposed to being core defining features (Frost et al., 1990; Rhéaume et al., 2000; Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002).

The third component of perfectionistic climate is coercive behavior used to pressure perfect performance (control). Drawing on SDT, controlling climate refers to an environment that is coercive and puts pressure on others to feel, think, and behave in a particular way (Self-Determination Theory, SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). There are a number of important features to note for the control component of perfectionistic climate. First, for perfectionistic climate, control has a narrow focus on controlling behaviors that are exhibited with the intention of preventing even minor mistakes and pressuring the attainment of perfect performance. Second, our control component is primarily focused on externally controlling contingencies that put pressure on perfect performance. Externally controlling contingencies include the use of threats, punishments, rewards, and other power-assertive strategies that are controlling and limit autonomy. In other words, the coercive strategies that people employ (e.g., “The coach uses rewards and punishments to encourage perfect performance”). The importance of including such coercive and punitive strategies is evident in research examining parental factors influencing the development of perfectionism (Speirs Neumeister, 2004).

The fourth component of perfectionistic climate captures the withdrawal or manipulation of recognition and appreciation based upon the attainment of perfect performance (conditional regard). Conditional regard includes a focus on more positive treatment following perfect performance and more negative treatment following imperfect performance. Closely related to the control component of perfectionistic climate, conditional

regard is taken from SDT and reflects an important feature of a controlling climate that is coercive, manipulative, and highly authoritarian (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Similar to controlling strategies, conditional regard has also been linked to the development of perfectionism (Curran, Hill, & Williams, 2017). Unlike external controlling strategies, however, conditional regard is a predominantly internally controlling expression of control. That is, it is behaviors that elicit a desire to gain feelings of acceptance and avoid of feelings of shame or guilt (e.g., "The coach is more upset and unapproachable when performances are not perfect"). In line with SDT, we regard conditional regard as a distinct expression of control (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010) that warrants inclusion alongside the control component as part of a perfectionistic climate.

The final component of perfectionistic climate pertains to worry and vigilance regarding mistakes and the consequences of not performing perfectly (anxiousness). This component includes overprotective behaviors that reflect an irrational preoccupation with mistakes, an aversion to novel and uncontrollable circumstances, and excessive worry regarding welfare and safety. This component is drawn from the model of Flett et al. (2002) in which perfectionism develops in a family environment when parents display an excessive focus on mistakes and the negative implications of not being perfect (anxious rearing pathway). Anxiousness also aligns with AGT and an ego-involving climate in which parents can display excessive worry about mistakes made by their children (White et al., 1992; White, 1996). This kind of worry-conducive climate that has been found to be positively related to perfectionism in young athletes (Gustafsson, Hill, Stenling, and Wagnsson, 2016).

Implications of perfectionistic climate

The introduction of the concept of perfectionistic climate has three main implications for the study of perfectionism. First, perfectionism should not be viewed and studied solely as

a feature (or problem) of the individual. Rather, perfectionism can be studied as a broader social pressure that will not only make people more or less likely to develop perfectionism, but also prone to experience the consequences of perfectionistic pressure without ever fully adopting it as a personal quality. Second, because the consequences of more or less perfectionistic climates can be studied independently of trait perfectionism, the social-environmental aspects of different achievement contexts will become the primary focus of inquiry for some researchers. Third, the concept of perfectionistic climate emphasizes the need for more purposeful construction of social environments, particularly for young people, by practitioners, and it foregrounds interventions focused on teacher, parent, and coach education aimed at reducing components of the environment that are perfectionistic.

Development of perfectionism

We conceived of perfectionistic climate partly with the development of perfectionism in mind and drawing from both recent proposals on the development of perfectionism and previous proposals based on multiple pathways. Regarding recent proposals, Hewitt et al. (2017) highlight various early childhood experiences that are relevant to the development of perfectionism. The focus is primarily on how asynchrony (or mismatch) between a child's attachment needs (e.g., the need for affection, nurturance, and reassurance) and a caregiver's responses provide the basis for the development of perfectionism. For instance, when a caregiver is experienced as being unresponsive or inconsistent in fulfilling attachment needs, young children may develop a view of themselves as flawed and unworthy, and others as unavailable and critical. This fragile sense of self and negative view of others, in turn, instils beliefs that being or appearing perfect to others will provide respite from rejection and lead to acceptance. The components of perfectionistic climate are relevant in this regard, as they too capture features of the social environment that undermine a sense of unconditional acceptance and will give rise to a view of others as non-responsive, neglectful, and overly

critical. As such, we believe that a perfectionistic climate will lay a foundation for asynchrony and perfectionism in young people.

Regarding previous proposals on the development of perfectionism, Flett et al. (2002) outlined a conceptual model incorporating several factors pertinent to the development of perfectionism (e.g., child factors, parental factors, and environmental factors). This model places an emphasis on family factors and the role of parents in contributing to the development of perfectionism. In particular, the model considers multiple family environments that are shaped by parents and that have the potential to maintain, reinforce, or further exacerbate the development of perfectionism in young people. These family contexts include demanding environments in which parental acceptance is contingent on meeting unrealistically high parental standards (social expectations pathway), hostile environments in which parents engage in harsh parental practices (social reaction pathway), and intense environments in which parents are excessively worried about mistakes and the negative implications of not being perfect (anxious rearing pathway). These pathways emphasise parenting styles and practices (what parents do) that shape the immediate family environment in which perfectionism develops. This contrasts with the other developmental pathway that emphasize the personality of parents (who parents are) and the tendency for young children to model or imitate perfectionism from their parents (social learning pathway). We consider perfectionistic climate to straddle the first three pathways by encompassing the behaviors, practices, and relational styles exhibited by significant others.

Pervasive consequences of perfectionistic climate

We believe that perfectionistic climate has special relevance to the development of perfectionism. However, we also consider that children and adolescents' experiences of a highly perfectionistic climate will more broadly thwart the capacity to thrive and contribute

to various undesirable outcomes. We are thinking specifically of research on how different motivational climates have a variety of important consequences for young people. For instance, from an AGT perspective, research in various contexts (e.g., education and sport) has shown that perceptions of an ego-involving climate—in which key social agents (e.g., teachers, coaches, and instructors) emphasise the importance of outperforming others, regard mistakes as worthy of punishment, and value only the most superior performers—are typically related with various undesirable achievement-related outcomes in young people. For instance, an ego-involving climate has been found to undermine friendship quality, give rise to negative cognitions and emotions (e.g., higher anxiety, lower enjoyment, lower confidence), and confer vulnerability to ill-being in the form of burnout (Duda, Papaioannou, Appleton, Quested, & Krommidas, 2014; Harwood, Keegan, Smith, & Raine, 2015). On this basis, we would anticipate that a perfectionistic climate will be relevant to the same social-cognitive outcomes linked to an ego-involving climate.

The role of significant others in shaping the motivational climate has also been examined from an SDT perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research in this area has focused on controlling behaviors in the roles of teachers, parents, and coaches in educational, family, and sporting contexts (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009). Researchers have found that perceptions of controlling climates are typically related to less favourable outcomes and experiences in young people. For instance, a controlling climate has been found to thwart psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, give rise to more undesirable forms of motivation, and confer vulnerability to a range of negative outcomes such as depression and burnout (e.g., Barcza-Renner, Eklund, Morin, & Habeeb, 2016; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Like a controlling climate, perfectionistic climate encompasses components that are likely to hinder optimal psychological development and undermine well-

being. Therefore, we would anticipate similarity between the consequences associated with a controlling climate and a perfectionistic climate.

Intervention and perfectionism

In keeping with current personality approaches to perfectionism, as far as we are aware, all attempts to manage or treat perfectionism have focused on the individual. In a recent meta-analysis assessing evidence for interventions targeting perfectionism, Lloyd, Schmidt, Khondoker, and Tchanturia (2015) identified eight studies examining psychotherapy interventions targeting perfectionism and associated adjustment difficulties (anxiety and depression). In all studies, some form of cognitive behavioral therapy was employed. Although the specific format (e.g., individual therapy *versus* self-help therapy) and duration (e.g., number of sessions) of the interventions varied, Lloyd et al. (2015) found evidence to support the efficacy of cognitive behavioral interventions in reducing perfectionism on an individual basis. These findings are promising but, as others have highlighted, perfectionism is notoriously difficult to treat and long-term change especially hard to obtain (Hewitt et al., 2017). Considering these clinical difficulties, it seems particularly important for intervention work also to include measures that target the relational context in which perfectionism develops and is maintained. In this regard, we consider perfectionistic climate to be an important area of intervention that could help prevent the development and maintenance of perfectionism.

The advent of perfectionistic climate means that intervention efforts could focus on educating key social agents (e.g., teachers, parents and coaches) on the various behaviors, practices, and relational styles that contribute to a perfectionistic climate. The creation and distribution of educational resources would be useful, with programmatic schemes of training likely being the most effective. Intervention work of this kind has taken place, guided by key

tenets of AGT and SDT (e.g., Braithwaite, Spray, & Warburton, 2011; Su & Reeve, 2011). These efforts have involved manipulating the social environment to reduce ego-involving and controlling features by promoting more task-involving and autonomy-supportive features (e.g., encouraging task mastery over outperforming others and providing personal freedom over personal repression). The studies in this area have provided evidence to support the efficacy of such interventions. This is apparent both in terms of how such interventions have evidenced change in the behaviours of social agents, and how such changes manifest in more positive experiences for those in the environment (e.g., less anxiety, more enjoyment, and less likely to dropout). We believe that similar interventions hold great promise in regard to reducing the development of trait perfectionism and its negative effects.

Conclusion

We have argued for the study of perfectionism to be broadened beyond a focus on the characteristics or qualities of an individual to a focus on features of the social environment that are perfectionistic. To do so, we have proposed a new concept—perfectionistic climate—that includes components drawn from different theoretical approaches. We consider perfectionistic climate to be which are especially relevant to the development of perfectionism, but also have broad consequences for improving experiences for children and adolescents. We encourage researchers and practitioners to consider the relevance and value of this concept in their future work, including the development and assessment of interventions to reduce perfectionism and its negative effects.

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