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A qualitative study of perfectionism among self-identified perfectionists in sport and the performing arts

Andrew P. Hill

York St John University

Chad S. G. Witcher

University of Lethbridge

John K. Gotwals

Lakehead University

Anna F. Leyland

University of Sheffield

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrew P. Hill:

a.hill@yorksj.ac.uk

Abstract

When adopting any measure of perfectionism to examine the characteristic in sport or the performing arts, researchers make assumptions regarding its core features and, sometimes, its effects. So to avoid doing so, in the current study we employed qualitative methods to examine the accounts of self-identified perfectionists. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore the opinions and perceptions of high-level, self-identified perfectionists from sport, dance, and music. In particular, we sought to obtain detailed information regarding (i) participants' perceptions of the main features of being a perfectionist and (ii) how they perceived being a perfectionist to influence their lives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 international/professional athletes, dancers, and musicians. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes within the transcripts. Three overarching themes were identified: drive, accomplishment, and strain. Being a perfectionist was characterised by the participants as having ever increasing standards, obsessiveness, rigid and dichotomous thinking, and dissatisfaction. The participants also described how being a perfectionist influenced their lives by, on the one hand, providing greater capacity for success in their respective domains but, on the other hand, contributing to varying degrees of personal and interpersonal difficulties**.** The accounts suggest that, in the main, the content of current models and measures adequately capture the features of being a perfectionist in sport and performing arts. However, a greater focus on obsessiveness, dissatisfaction, and intra- versus inter-personal dimensions of perfectionism would provide further insight into the lives of perfectionists in these domains.

A qualitative study of perfectionism among self-identified perfectionists in sport and the performing arts

Perfectionism is considered to be an important personality characteristic in sport and the performing arts. This is, in in part, because at the highest levels extraordinary dedication is essential and near perfect performances often necessary in order to be successful in these domains. As such, perhaps more so than in other domains, the pursuit of flawlessness is legitimatized, encouraged, and even revered in sport and the performing arts (Hall & Hill, 2012). Perfectionism is also considered important because it is thought to be especially common in these domains. Coaches and instructors often recognise the characteristic in the high-level athletes and performing artists they work with and many high-level athletes and performing arts identify it in themselves (e.g.,.Gould & Maynard, 2009; Mainwaring, 2009; Zwann, 2009). Consequently, there are numerous anecdotal reports from these domains in which athletes and performing artists describe how being a perfectionist has helped and/or hindered their careers (see Hall, Hill, & Appleton, 2012; Hall & Hill, 2012, for examples).

In support of the importance of perfectionism in these domains, research has found perfectionism predicts a range of outcomes among athletes and performing artists (see Gotwals, Stoeber, Dunn, & Stoll, 2012; Hall & Hill, 2012, Stoeber, 2012; for reviews). Research in sport and dance, in particular, has increased considerably recently and continues to illustrate how perfectionism influences the motivation, performance, and wellbeing of those in these domains. The recent work of Nordin-Bates and colleagues (Nordin-Bates, Cumming, Aways, & Sharp, 2011; Nordin-Bates, Hill, Cumming, Aujla, & Redding, 2014), for example, has shown how perfectionism is associated with the anxiety and imagery dancers experience and how perceptions of the achievement climate in dance changes over time. Similarly, the work of

Stoeber and colleagues (Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Stoeber, Uphill, & Hotham, 2009) has illustrated how perfectionism can contribute to the success of athletes and musicians, as well as contribute to other important factors in these achievement contexts (e.g., motivation regulation and achievement goals).

The current study is aligned with this research in that we focus on the possible implications of perfectionism in sport and the performing arts. However, the study is also a notable departure from these studies in that we do not adopt any particular model or measure of perfectionism when doing so. This is because, to date, examination of perfectionism in sport and the performing arts has been heavily guided by the assumptions of existing models and measures of perfectionism. These assumptions pertain to what constitutes the core features of the characteristic and, in some cases, its likely effects. We sought to avoid this issue by utilising qualitative methods to explore the opinions and perceptions of high-level athletes, dancers, and musicians who identified themselves as perfectionists. In doing so, the features of being a perfectionist among athletes and performing artists, as well as the perceived consequences of these features, are described for the first time by those who recognise the characteristic in themselves and in a manner that is unconstrained by pre-existing perspectives.

Disparate approaches and opinions

As noted by others (e.g., Flett & Hewitt, 2002), there is no agreed definition of perfectionism. One consequence has been that researchers have adopted a number of different approaches. The diversity and disagreement evident in the approaches in sport and other contexts provides the first broad rationale for exploring perfectionism using qualitative methods. This diversity and disagreement is reflected in the content of the instruments used to measure perfectionism (see Enns & Cox, 2002, for a review). A commitment to exceptionally high

standards is common to all instruments; however, beyond this, features vary widely. Some instruments focus solely on intrapersonal dimensions (e.g., Almost Perfect Scale, Slaney Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001) whereas others include interpersonal dimensions (e.g., Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Some instruments seek to capture perfectionism across a wide range of dimensions (e.g., Perfectionism Inventory, R. Hill et al., 2004), whereas others include a smaller, more distilled, number (e.g., Multidimensional Inventory of Perfectionism in Sports, Stoeber, Otto, & Stoll, 2006). There are also instruments that include dimensions which are considered explicitly adaptive or maladaptive (e.g., Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale, Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, & Dewey, 1995) and those that do not make such distinctions (e.g., Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). As such, when measuring perfectionism, researchers implicitly espouse a particular perspective on perfectionism that may serve to perpetuate that particular view, complement and contradict other approaches to varying degrees, and, in some instances, presuppose its effects.

A related issue is the on-going debate regarding the existence of healthy perfectionists (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Greenspon, 2000; Hall et al., 2012). This debate provides the second broad rationale for the current study. The notion of the healthy perfectionist stems from Hamachek's (1978) distinction between normal and neurotic perfectionists. Hamachek (1978) described normal perfectionists as individuals who retain their commitment to exceptional standards but, in comparison to their neurotic counterparts, approach achievement settings in a more positive affective state and feel a greater sense of freedom and satisfaction in regards to their performance. The notion of the healthy perfectionist is evident in contemporary models of perfectionism, particularly the tripartite model (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). In this model the healthy

perfectionist is characterised by high levels of typically positive dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., personal standards) and low levels of typically negative dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., concern over mistakes). In addition, due to this configuration, the healthy perfectionist is expected to be associated with better outcomes than other perfectionists (e.g., unhealthy perfectionists) and so is comparatively more desirable.

There is empirical support for this perspective in that healthy perfectionists (or similar groups) have emerged in research examining typologies of perfectionism among athletes and dancers. In addition, being a healthy perfectionist is typically associated with better outcomes in comparison to other perfectionist groups (e.g., Cumming & Duda, 2012; Gotwals, 2011). However, the notion of the healthy perfectionist has been met with resistance from some researchers in sport and the performing arts (e.g., Flett & Hewitt, 2005, 2014; Hall, Hill, & Appleton, 2012). These researchers argue that it is not clear whether these athletes and artists are truly perfectionists or are instead exhibiting a more general form of achievement behaviour that is being conflated with being a perfectionist (see also Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Greenspon, 2000; Hall, 2006). For these researchers, all perfectionists are essentially unhealthy perfectionists. Attempts to address this issue has largely been driven by the use of existing measures with few studies attempting to adopt other methods to better understand perfectionists and their lives. Here, we adopt qualitative methods to do so.

Qualitative Research Methods

Employed from within a constructionist epistemological view, qualitative research methods such as interviews acknowledge the importance of participants' unique perceptions. Findings are 'grounded' in the lived experiences of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) allowing him or her to be understood in 'their own terms' (Patton, 1980, p.22). As such,

perspectives that may not be evident in the current purview, nor easily gleaned via quantitative methodologies, are allowed to emerge. Within the context of the current state of research examining perfectionism in sport and the performing arts, utilizing qualitative methods provide a means of gaining a more holistic understanding of perfectionists, offers an opportunity to challenge (or affirm) the content of current models, and derive a more thorough understanding of perfectionism (Slaney, Chadha, Mobley, & Kennedy, 2000). In addition, adopting qualitative methods in this area also provides a greater focus on the context. Specifically, most models of perfectionism were originally developed in other contexts and then applied to sport and the performing arts (Gotwals & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2014). This means idiosyncratic features of perfectionism as manifested in these domains might be missed and some elements of the experiences of perfectionists in sport and the performing arts lost when adopting quantitative methods.

A number of studies have adopted qualitative methods to examine perfectionists. The majority of this research has focused on exploring the experiences of perfectionists in an education domain. Speirs Neumeister and colleagues (Speirs Neumeister, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Speirs Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2007, 2009), in particular, have used qualitative methods to highlight the experiences of academically gifted students classified as perfectionists in terms of a range of topics (e.g., achievement motives, responses to challenge, and experiences of success and failure). More recently, Gotwals and Spencer-Cavaliere (2014) conducted the first study using qualitative methods to explore perfectionistic athletes' perspectives on achievement in sport. They found notable differences between those identified as healthy and unhealthy perfectionists in terms of their personal expectations, how they coped with challenge, and their perceptions of others. Collectively, these studies have illustrated the value of qualitative methods

in this area by providing more in-depth accounts of the beliefs, opinions and perceptions of perfectionists.

The current study builds on existing qualitative research by addressing two specific shortcomings. The first shortcoming is that, to date, only one study has examined the accounts of athletes using qualitative methods (viz. Gotwals & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2014) and none have examined the accounts of performing artists. This is surprising as Flett and Hewitt (2005), and others (Hall & Hill, 2012), have argued that sport and the performing arts may offer ideal domains in which to study perfectionism because flawless performance is so overtly encouraged in these domains, particularly at a high level. In addition, because research suggests that perfectionism may be best examined in a domain-specific manner (e.g., Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009), it is possible that individuals may express perfectionism in one domain but not another, some dimensions of perfectionism may be more or less salient in a particular domain, and its effects may be dependent on the domain. In this regard, exploring the opinions and perceptions of athletes, dancers, and musicians offers unique insight into being a perfectionist within performance contexts.

The second specific shortcoming to be addressed is that studies which have adopted qualitative methods have typically done so by examining the accounts of individuals selected based on scores on existing measures (e.g., Speirs Neumeister, 2004a, 2004b; Speirs Neumeister et al., 2007, 2009). This includes the only qualitative study in sport by Gotwals and Spencer-Cavaliere (2014). While this approach is useful in terms of testing existing models, as described earlier, it restricts understanding of perfectionism to the perspective adopted. One alternative is to examine the accounts of those who identify themselves as perfectionists. This strategy has been adopted by Slaney and colleagues on two occasions (Slaney & Ashby, 1996; Slaney et al.,

2000) when examining the features and meaning of perfectionism among students and professionals. This strategy is thought to have a number of benefits when the aim is to explore perfectionism. In particular, it minimises the bias bought to the study in terms of the specific dimensions or models of perfectionism investigated and avoids perpetuating existing negative (or positive) perspectives of perfectionism and its dimensions (Slaney & Ashby, 1996). With these strengths in mind, the current study explores perfectionism from the perspective of athletes and performing artists, as opposed to theorists and researchers in this area.

In summary, the purpose of the study was to explore the opinions and perceptions of high-level performers in sport, dance, and music that identified themselves as perfectionists. To this end, qualitative methods were used to gain detailed information about (i) what participants considered the main features of being a perfectionist and (ii) how they perceived being a perfectionist to influence their lives.

Method

Recruitment

A purposeful sampling approach was used to recruit participants in that only 'perfectionists' were sought (Patton, 2002). The sampling strategy modelled the approach adopted by Slaney and colleagues (Slaney et al., 2000; Slaney & Ashby, 1996). Specifically, no specific definition, model, or measure of perfectionism was adopted for recruitment. Instead, participants were sought who labelled themselves as perfectionists. In addition, participants were required to be, or to have been, high-level performers; defined as athletes competing at an international level and professional-level musicians and dancers (i.e., part or all of the participant's income came from music or dance). Participants were recruited via advertisements sent to sports, dance and music organisations in the UK and through discussion with gatekeepers

in these organisations. Adverts included details of the project and requested those who described themselves as perfectionists and who were interested in taking part in the study to contact the research team. When prospective participants did so they were provided with further details (e.g., types of questions they were likely to be asked and approximate length of the interview). If he or she decided to participate, arrangements were made to conduct the interview during a convenient time.

Participants

Fifteen high-level performers were interviewed. The group consisted of 7 athletes, 4 dancers, and 4 musicians. The athletes included 3 males and 4 females aged 29 to 39 years (*M* age = 32 years). Two athletes were retired and the others were still competing. The athletes competed in various individual and team sports (e.g., hockey, volleyball, cycling, fell running, and track and field events). All had competed at an international level (e.g., World, European, and Commonwealth Championships in their respective sports) and, when asked to list their three highest achievements, they listed a number of honours (e.g., winning championships, captaining their country, representing their county, and nominations for various individual awards). Participants reported that they had spent, on average, 13.67 years (SD = 4.72, range 7 to 20) participating in their sport and 20.57 hours (SD = 6.83, range 10 to 30) per week involved in their sport.

The dancers included 1 male and 3 females aged 24 to 27 years (mean age = 26 years). Three were currently professional dancers and one had previously been so and was now a choreographer. Three had training in ballet and one in Latin, African and Caribbean styles of dance. When asked to list their three highest achievements, they listed specific performances and shows, as well as individuals they had performed with. Two reported that, in itself, continuing to

be a professional dancer was one of their best achievements. The group reported that they had spent, on average, 20.25 years (*SD* = 9.11, range 8 to 30) participating in dance and 24.57 hours (*SD* = 17.32, range 12 to 50) per week involved in dance.

The musicians included 1 male and 3 females aged 26 to 63 years (mean age = 45 years). One was currently a professional musician, composer, and writer. The other three were currently professional musicians. Of those who were only musicians, one was a classically trained professional orchestral musician, one was a member of a professional quartet (and former section leader of a number of amateur orchestras and orchestral librarian) and the final musician was a professional singer (recorded a studio album and performed at a number of European music festivals). When asked to list their three highest achievements, like the dancers, they typically listed specific performances and also listed specific venues they had performed in. The group reported that they had spent, on average, 24.25 years (SD = 11.00, range 13 to 36) participating in music and 58.33 hours (SD = 27.54, range 45 to 90) per week involved in music.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted via telephone. This allowed flexibility and convenience for participants, many of whom had demanding schedules and were located in different parts of the UK. Although qualitative interviews are usually conducted in person, evidence suggests interviews conducted via telephone can provide comparable data (e.g., Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide (provided in the appendix) which consisted of a general introduction that outlined the scope of the study and brief introductory questions (e.g., ‘Could you tell me how you became involved in sport/dance/music?’). This was followed by three sections that included open-ended questions focused on (a) describing features of being a perfectionist, (b) its influence on participants’ lives as an athlete, dancer, or musician,

and (c) its influence on life more generally (e.g., relationships with significant others). In developing the interview schedule, a number of questions used by Slaney and colleagues (Ashby, Slaney, Noble, Gnilka, & Rice, 2012; Slaney & Ashby, 1996; Slaney et al., 2000) were used (e.g., 'Why do you think of yourself as a perfectionist?') along with variants of their questions (e.g., 'What would you say are the main features of being a perfectionist') and additional questions that fit the purpose of this study ('How does being a perfectionist influence your life as an athlete/dancer/musician'). In addition, a list of probes were developed and used during the interviews to seek clarification ('What do you mean by…'), elaboration ('Could you say more about…') or detail of responses ('Who else was involved…') (Patton, 2002). Interviews typically lasted 30 minutes, were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and transcripts were stripped of any personal identifying information. All participants were also given the opportunity to review the transcripts to confirm the content and remove information they were not comfortable with including.

Data Analyses

Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), interview data across all participants were subjected to a thematic analysis approach whereby patterns and themes were identified and constructed through an inductive, iterative process. Our approach to analysis involved multiple analysts (Patton, 1999), capitalizing on expertise related to the substantive content area and qualitative data analysis. Themes were a product of ongoing discussion and debate regarding analysts' interpretations throughout the data analysis process (Richards & Morse, 2013). The first three authors initially coded six transcripts independently and then met to discuss interpretations and to develop consensus regarding the preliminary construction of initial codes. Next, the first three authors independently analyzed all remaining transcripts based on the

establishment of initial codes and over the course of regular 'check-in' meetings, refined and established new codes and worked towards the development of preliminary themes. In subsequent meetings, focus shifted toward refining/modifying themes and reaching consensus on the construction and labeling of major themes. Throughout the process, data memos were used to aid each analyst in the categorization of data 'chunks' and refinement of themes. Analysis 'cycled' through waves of code development/refinement and theme development/refinement and, guided by constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), culminated in the final identification of themes.

Data Quality

Our approach to data quality was guided by Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson and Spiers (2002). Morse and colleagues argued for, "…a return to validity as a means for obtaining rigor through using techniques of verification" (p. 14). As opposed to post-hoc evaluations of validity, Morse et al. (2002) advocated the use of verification strategies that were built into the qualitative research process. With this in mind, we designed the study so to ensure methodological coherence, with clear synergy between research questions posed, methods used, and analytical procedures adopted. We also selected a highly appropriate sample from relevant contexts that had knowledge of the research topic and could provide 'information-rich' cases. In addition, we were particularly aware of the need to be flexible and open throughout the research process. Notably, as described in the preceding section, our collaborative approach to analysis contributed to interpretive rigor through our engagement in discussion and debate regarding the interpretations reflected by memos, coding and, ultimately, the creation of themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this manner we believe our "cocreated constructions [can] be trusted to provide some purchase on [this] important phenomenon" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.179).

Readers are encouraged to use the quotes from the participants provided in the results section to form their own judgements and interpretations and assess the validity of ours.[1]

Results

Overview

This section is organized to align with the study's overarching research questions. "Drive" is presented as the overarching theme that offers insight into the main features of being a perfectionist. Similarly, themes of "Accomplishment" and "Strain" represent the overarching themes of how the participants described how they considered being a perfectionist to manifest in their lives. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Drive

Participants identified a variety of features they perceived as central to being a perfectionist including: high achievement/performance standards, an "obsessive" approach to improvement, rigid and dichotomous thinking, and recurring dissatisfaction with current performances or works. Consistent with these dimensions, the overarching theme of "Drive" referred to participants' unwavering commitment to, and focus on, constantly improving her or his performance/work.

Participants made it clear they had high standards of achievement and expectations regarding their performances. As a result, participants looked beyond current performances toward upcoming challenges - focusing on ways to continually improve. For example, Allison explained, "…you always want to be better than you actually are at that moment. You're not happy until something is completely perfect but it's almost like perfect doesn't exist - always looking onto what's next."

For Lou, it was a matter of, "not settling for mediocre…trying to push to that next level and almost being as close to ideal or close to…you know, perfect performance as possible…to almost be better, be better, be better…and not just settling." Elaborating further, Lou added,

> [I] think that sort of perfectionism thing comes down to the sort of detail or planning, the detail of…the level of commitment, the sort of always striving to do better you know? I think being a perfectionist almost becomes obsess[ive].

The notion that obsessiveness was a component of perfectionism and helped 'fuel' participants' drive was emphasized by several other participants. For example, Agnes described perfectionism and her approach to her career as, "…almost a superstition, you know, this obsession with getting everything spot on…" Similarly, Sarah viewed "obsessive" behaviour as part and parcel of perfectionism, "I think it's almost...being obsessed isn't it? And just trying your very hardest in everything…trying to get absolutely everything right and the very best out of yourself." Based on comments like these, it appears participants were consumed, if not "obsessed," with striving to constantly improve. Described as an "obsessive work ethic" by Helen, she explained,

> I think I have this obsessive work ethic about what I do that makes me a perfectionist because I don't stop doing something until it's the best it can possibly be and I think that's being a perfectionist...I think perfectionists are workaholics.

Participants' "obsessiveness" appeared to be characterized by a particular meticulousness, which included attention to detail and extremely sharpened focus. For instance, in explaining his preparations, Nelson said,

> I think attention to detail [makes me a perfectionist] more than anything else. If I've got…a race in mind for example, I'll make sure that I stick to a training regime, I'll make

> sure I eat really well and I'll try and leave nothing to chance. So I just make sure everything is in place, even sleeping, you know - the right amount in between and just making sure that I'm doing everything I can to achieve what I want to achieve.

In tandem with high achievement/performance standards and an "obsessive" approach to improvement which characterized "Drive," was an accompanying way of thinking about performance that was both rigid and dichotomous. For example, many participants did not afford themselves any leeway in terms of their efforts and mistakes were not tolerated. For example, according to Helen, 'the only way to be the best musician is to just not accept any mistakes" Furthermore, a clear distinction was made between behaviours that were acceptable and those that were not. For instance, according to Bernice, "everything has to be black and white." Similarly, Agnes remarked, "I'm not very good at being flexible." and Francesca offered, "I have to be a perfectionist in my dancing because otherwise I'd be rubbish… I'm very much a person of extremes."

Through a constant, and perhaps obsessive, commitment to improvement and rigid thinking, participants remained unsatisfied with current levels of performances or quality of one's works. Helen captured this idea particularly well,

> Focus - I think that's really important so that you're not getting distracted by anything else other than the task that you're doing…The more focussed you can be the more perfect something is. So I think having a really tight degree of focus going on, I think revisiting things so… if I've recorded something I will take extra takes constantly just to see if I can make it better. Two days ago I was in a recording studio and I was just recording something for an advert and the producer came over with the headphones and went, 'okay, we've got some good takes in there that's fine.' And I just turned to him and

> said, ‘no I think I can do one more, I think I can do one more let’s try it.’ So I won't be satisfied and even though the producer was like, ‘yeah that’s fine, I’ve got enough to work with,’ I wanted to go that one step further and see if I could make something better.

Quotations from other participants helped illustrate the importance placed upon remaining dissatisfied with one’s current level of performance or quality of one’s work. For example, Luann explained,

> I think sometimes it can be easy to be dissatisfied constantly because, if and when you reach your goal, whatever that may be, whether it be the best race you’ve ever done or the best cake you’ve ever done or the best piece of writing you’ve ever done, you then instantly expect more of yourself because you’ve done that so was it really your best? Could you have done better? So, you’re kind of expecting more of yourself so there’s that unrelenting desire to push for more.

How these features collectively shaped the mindset of the participants was captured nicely by Helen,

> I think the main thing about being a perfectionist for me is the not being satisfied…even if people are saying, ‘oh that’s great,’ you never come away thinking, ‘oh wow what I did is perfect’… [being a] perfectionist is never thinking anything is perfect.

Accomplishment and Strain

All participants described how to, varying degrees, being a perfectionist influenced their lives in sport and the performing arts. Most were able to identify both benefits and drawbacks to being a perfectionist. On the positive side, most participants conveyed that they believed they were better off being a perfectionist as it was perceived to be essential to success and accomplishment in her or his respective domains. However, participants also expressed a

negative side to perfectionism, especially with respect to experiencing strain in the form of personal and interpersonal difficulties.

Accomplishment. The theme, "Accomplishment" referred to participants' perception that being a perfectionist was necessary in order to reach one's full performance potential and the pinnacle of success in her or his domain. The type of perfectionist "Drive" described previously was considered necessary for participants' professional success and accomplishment. For example, according to Luann, "If you want to be any good you have to be totally - perfectionism is in my opinion the only way to approach sport seriously if you're looking for serious results." Emphasizing the vital importance of perfectionism, Carl stated simply, "I think if I wasn't [a perfectionist] then I wouldn't have achieved things." Similarly, Francesca explained, "I'd like to think it's got me to where I am and to be a professional…if I'd just rested on my laurels when people told me I was good then you'd never have got to where you're going." Clearly, participants viewed perfectionism as vital to their success and so from this perspective, it was viewed in positive terms – without it, one would likely fall short of one's goals. Compared to those who were not perfectionists, Helen viewed perfectionists as possessing, "…an edge over other people in the competition because they're not willing to accept something less."

Participants' perceptions regarding the advantages of being a perfectionist extended beyond those pertaining to success and accomplishment in the professional domain. For instance, Helen addressed the importance within the professional realm, "…well I think there's quite a lot [of advantages] because you achieve more just because you don't accept low standards…" but took a broader view of perfectionism,

> …for ambitious people the more you achieve is always a positive thing. I think I get quite a lot of satisfaction about getting better at things…there is a level of satisfaction

about getting better at something and I think that's good - and that's about the working hard that you get through demanding more so I think that's a good thing.

For Nelson, perfectionist characteristics relevant to his life as an athlete were viewed to extend into his life outside of sport; an extension he considered advantageous,

> [A benefit of perfectionism is that] I think you're an organised person definitely. So I don't take - leave anything to chance…I just find it gives my life structure…whether I'm at work or whether I'm just relaxing or I'm focusing on a race or training, I use spreadsheets for everything and…it means that I never miss anything or I never leave anything to chance. And I think it gives me the best possible chance I can have of succeeding in any aspect of life.

Others referred to the development of confidence via perfectionism and how this extended to one's personal life. For example, Gloria said simply, "…you learn things well…it gives me confidence." Agnes elaborated upon the notion of confidence across domains,

> [Being a perfectionist has] given me more confidence in other areas of my life. You know, I never thought I'd ever be, you know, do as much as I have done with it and you know it's made me think that I don't have to put limits on other areas like my…career or job.

It was clear that Helen felt similar to the participants referred to above, as she clearly viewed perfectionism in a positive light, and personally beneficial in numerous respects,

> I'd sell perfectionism - if you wanted to stretch yourself to see how much better you could do things and see if you could - if you were a competitive person and wanted to achieve more then I'd adopt a perfectionist attitude because it helps focus the mind,

offers more wisdom in problem solving and helps feed your ambition if you're of that mind.

Strain. Although participants perceived perfectionism to be positive in a number of ways, they also discussed negative aspects of perfectionism. For instance, participants referenced the strain of being a perfectionist. This theme referred to the anxiety and constant pressure experienced by participants by virtue of a perceived obsession with analyzing one's performances or works in order to constantly improve.

As discussed, developing confidence was attributed to perfectionism by several participants. However, it was made clear that this feeling was delicate and should not be assumed to apply globally, to other domains. What was described was a more tenuous and potentially negative side of perfectionism. For example, Francesca suggested that confidence could be fleeting if venturing into unfamiliar territory; a potentially stressful situation,

> …I was very, very worried that I would be really bad…I'm really not used to being bad at anything. Everything that I do I do well and I don't know if that's because over the years I've only chosen to do things that I do well? I mean as it happens I did do very well - I got like a gold so that's great but there was definitely that fear when you start something new that, 'well am I going to be as good as this as I am at everything else?'

The hesitancy or "fear" portrayed in the quotation above was articulated by others. For example, describing the stress associated with a fear of failure, Luann admitted,

> [I]'ve still got this nagging feeling in the back of my head, 'Am I actually clever enough?' and I think that's a lot of it to do with my perfectionism, I guess everyone has that to a degree…but even with everyone around me saying, 'No, no this is what you're suited for,' you know, 'you're clever enough,' 'you're good for it go for it.' Even then

there's this nagging feeling, you know, 'Am I going to achieve what I need to be able to achieve?'…So yes, it has a huge effect…it's not just in the sport but in every way you think it affects it…because you've got such drive I don't know if your fear of failure is more than say somebody who hasn't got such a drive perhaps… I mean, referring to my friend - they hadn't had such a fear of, you know, failing. They just [say], you know, 'OK, whatever. We'll do this next time.'…that's a huge disaster for a perfectionist!

Similarly, other participants indicated an underlying insecurity. For example, Allison explained, "…[perfectionists are] almost frozen by the fear of not doing it…I've noticed that in a few people. They're frozen by the fear of not doing well, so they do nothing."

Beyond fear and insecurity, participants discussed other aspects of perfectionism which created strain. Many of these comments related to one's constant engagement and time spent doing and/or thinking about engagement. For instance, Lou admitted, "I sometimes still struggle to almost sort of switch off sometimes from things… I think sometimes it'd be quite nice just to be able to sit down at night and switch off!" "Switching off" was clearly a problem for Nelson as well. As he explained, "Especially if I've done badly in a race, I'll pick at it. I'll think about it and it'll chew me up for days if not weeks until the next one." Concerns regarding his level of engagement and the manner in which it preoccupied his mind prompted Nelson to confide,

I wish I wasn't as much a perfectionist, I wish I was more relaxed. I think sometimes you know you can do something and it's fine but I'll then go back and I'll just - I'll rethink things and sometimes I think too much.

Unfortunately, adopting an alternative approach by taking more time to relax did not appear to be a viable option either. As Ralph explained,

> If I don't work I feel guilty. I feel terrible if I don't work. But then sometimes I think, 'well, what's the point of working?' I'm not getting the performances…why should I bother? I'll just go fishing or sit and do nothing and sometimes you do that. But I always then feel incredibly guilty. You know, I just feel I've got to work and it's always been with me - that drive to work.

The type of engagement, ruminative thoughts, and inability to disengage and "relax" described above had negative repercussions. For example, Nick indicated he experienced, "endless sleepless nights for weeks, months on end." For Sarah, the drive associated with perfectionism, "sometimes can just be exhausting." She continued,

> … if you know you're racking your brains and trying to think, 'Well, how can I be better? How can I do this better? How can I do this better?'… if you start trying too hard to find [those] little extra things it can be mentally exhausting.

Both Helen and Luann gave insightful descriptions regarding how the "drive" associated with perfectionism could create strain. Helen explained,

> I think there are quite a lot of negative impact[s] on other areas of your life because, say you've just performed and a lot of people come off stage feeling quite happy - just enjoying the act of performing. But if you are a perfectionist, all you do is go over the things that you could make better for the next time. And actually, that doesn't leave this good kind of sense of elation after performing. You're constantly looking for how you can make something better which isn't a very satisfying way to live life I don't think.

Similarly, Luann admitted she would question whether she experienced joy in reaching a goal or,

> Should I be sort of wallowing in it a bit longer?…instead of straight away moving on to the next one. And although obviously cycling brings me a huge lot of pleasure…there's

> also that kind of feeling - sometimes a hollow feeling that perhaps you need to be getting more - not enjoyment. I don't know how to put it. It's almost hollow sometimes…you're not getting - I don't know it's that a victory…is a hollow victory because suddenly it's no longer a victory it's now a small step on the bigger ladder rather than actually your last goal. So it was the top of your last ladder, it's now the bottom of your next ladder if you like. So suddenly…rather than looking at it as happy you're looking at it as negatively sort of thing - I suppose in a more kind of distressed way; certainly more a negative way than a positive way.

For some, strain was described alongside the notion of "sacrifice" particularly in terms of personal relationships. As Luann recognized,

> It can affect friendships possibly, in certain situations, and possibly family relations because it's such a whole encompassing thing…it's easy to get caught up in whatever you're doing…quite easy to get totally absorbed…I've been very lucky that my friends just completely understand that that's the kind of person that I am! I put in everything you know so it's not that I don't care, it's not that I don't think about them and not there for them. It's just that I'm so focused on achieving one thing.

Helen related a similar encounter with friends, where normal or enjoyable activities were sacrificed,

> …I often do say to friends, 'oh I'm sorry I can't go out tonight I need to go to the practice room,' and things like that. So, actually, being a perfectionist means I can't put that away and go and enjoy something else in my life. I have to keep going at this until it's at a standard that I accept. Everyone says I'm a massive workaholic and that it's actually a bit unhealthy. I think that it probably had the most negative impact on my social life.

The potentially extreme consequences of the willingness to sacrifice and its implications were also apparent. After discussing determination and the will to sacrifice, Ralph admitted, "…that's just how you are as a perfectionist you sacrifice. I sacrificed marriage on it. I sacrificed everything on it…you're very lucky if you can find a lady that would tolerate that sort of obsessiveness. " Summing up the professional and personal conflict, Ralph added, "…I think as a [performer] I've benefitted from being a perfectionist. As a person I probably haven't."

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the opinions and perceptions of high-level performers in sport, dance, and music that identified themselves as perfectionists. A particular focus was placed on (i) what participants considered the main features of being a perfectionist and (ii) how they perceived being a perfectionist influenced their lives. Based on the accounts of the participants, drive was identified as the overarching theme in terms of the main features of being a perfectionist. In addition, accomplishment and strain were identified as the overarching themes that captured how being a perfectionist influenced their lives. These themes are discussed below in context of current understanding of perfectionism and extant research in this area.

The characteristics of being a perfectionist

Against the backdrop of diversity and disagreement in terms of what constitutes the features of perfectionism, a number of findings are noteworthy. In particular, the features encapsulated by the theme of drive are largely common to existing models. The pursuit of exceptionally high standards, most notably, is typically regarded as the main feature of perfectionism. This was clearly reflected in the opinions of the athletes and performing artists. Other features, such as meticulousness and rigid/dichotomous thinking, are also similar to those included in existing models. These features have been described by early theorists (e.g., Burns,

1980) and, although often labelled differently, are evident in descriptions of both specific dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., concern over mistakes; Frost et al., 1990) and broader dimensions of perfectionism that reflect overly critical evaluations perfectionists are thought to employ (e.g., evaluative concerns; Gaudreau & Thompson, 2008). In all, these particular features can be considered to closely match those of current models and measures of perfectionism.

There were also a number of features that were more prominent in the accounts of the participants than in current models and measures or research. The first was obsessiveness. This was evident in terms of extraordinary levels of dedication, meticulousness, and ruminative thoughts or 'overthinking' the participants described. Others have observed in the accounts of perfectionists that obsessive thoughts are central to the industriousness associated with perfectionism (Rice, Bair, Castro, Cohen, & Hood, 2003) and there is evidence of a link between perfectionism and obsessive compulsive symptoms (e.g., R. Hill et al., 2004). However, it is only recently that researchers have begun to examine the relationship between perfectionism and obsessiveness in sport and the performing arts. Moreover, this research has so far been limited to perfectionism and obsessive passion (a compulsive and rigid attraction to personally meaningful, highly valued, and self-defining activities; Vallerand, 2008) (Curran, Hill, Jowett, & Mallinson, 2014; Padlam & Aujla, 2014). The accounts of the participants here suggest obsessiveness is central to being a perfectionist. Further research examining the relationship between perfectionism and aspects of obsessiveness, then, and how obsessiveness shapes the positive and negative experiences of perfectionists, would be valuable.

A chronic state of dissatisfaction stood out in the participants' accounts as a central feature of perfectionism. Given that the inability to derive a sense of satisfaction from achievements has historically been identified as a central feature of (neurotic) perfectionism

(Hamacheck, 1978; Hollander, 1965), it is surprising that this feature has not been extensively explored in sport, music, and dance. Despite some initial evidence within the performing arts (e.g., Mor, Day, Flett, & Hewitt, 1995), research has yet to fully capture the cycle of dissatisfaction described by the athletes and performing artists here.. In addition, there have been some instances where dimensions of perfectionism have displayed small positive correlations with satisfaction (e.g., A. P. Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008). Our findings suggest that while the athletes and performing artists were able to garner satisfaction from their achievements, because they were fixated on identifying flaws in their performances, this satisfaction was eroded by a sense that they must do better in the future. Consequently, perfectionists may be better characterised by fleeting, less stable, experiences of satisfaction, rather than chronically low satisfaction per se. Capturing this process is an important aim for future research and, based on the accounts here, will offer further insight into the essence of being a perfectionist.

In the absence of any measures of perfectionism, we cannot comment with certainty on the degree of perfectionism expressed by the athletes and performing artists. However, it was evident from the accounts provided that the features they identified were experienced in varying amounts with some more extreme than others. It was also evident that in comparison to the athletes interviewed by Gotwals and Spencer-Cavaliere (2014), the accounts provided here were more varied and included a mix of the characteristics expressed by healthy and unhealthy perfectionists (e.g., a sense of confidence but rigid, all-or-nothing thinking and difficulty dealing with mistakes). In these regards, the features described here more closely mirrored the accounts of academically gifted self-oriented perfectionists interviewed by Speirs Neumeister et al. (2007) who described the same commitment to high standards partnered with all-or-none thinking and

distain for settling for less than perfection. It was this rigid mindset that we considered to distinguish these individuals as perfectionists, as opposed to conscientious or mastery-oriented (see Flett & Hewitt, 2006).

In terms of perfectionistic mindset, it is also noteworthy that the athletes and performing artists tended to describe being a perfectionist in distinctly personal terms, something they experienced as an internal drive. Some models of perfectionism include interpersonal dimensions, typically manifested as a perceived sense of pressure from others to be perfect or the tendency to impose perfectionistic judgements on others (e.g., Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; R. Hill et al., 2004). Much less emphasis was placed on interpersonal features by the participants. This was another notable departure from current models. The relative absence of interpersonal features of perfectionism may be because participants were recruited who considered themselves perfectionists and those who feel pressure from others to be perfect might not necessarily do so. Alternatively, self-focused or intrapersonal features of perfectionism may be especially prominent among high-level performers in sport and the performing arts and interpersonal features less so. Investigation of these speculative explanations is warranted given that socially prescribed pressures are cited as playing an important role in athletes' and performing artists' development of perfectionism and interpersonal features of perfectionism are often focussed upon in sport and the performing arts (Hall & Hill, 2012; Hall, Hill & Appleton, 2012).

The influence of being a perfectionist on their lives

All of the participants reported that being a perfectionist influenced their lives to varying degrees. There was also general recognition that being a perfectionist had both benefits and drawbacks. In this regard, the accounts of the participants were very similar to those provided in

previous qualitative research (e.g., Slaney et al., 2000; Slaney & Ashby, 1996; Rice et al., 2003). Stoeber (2014) has used the analogy of a 'double-edged sword' to capture the notion that perfectionism includes features that have both positive and negative effects in sport and dance. In many respects this is an apt description of the accounts of the participants. However, it is noteworthy that here, many of the effects appeared to be operating concurrently within the athletes' and performing artists' lives (i.e., high levels of accomplishment and high levels of anxiety, worry, and rumination). This is something that is not always obvious, or at the forefront of our minds, when adopting a more reductive approach to examining the effects of perfectionist characteristics. As such, the current study reaffirms the importance of considering perfectionism in a 'real world' context where the effects of perfectionism are likely to be eclectic and exceedingly complex.

The main benefit of being a perfectionist was identified by the participants as increased accomplishment. This is something that has emerged in other qualitative research. For example, self-identified perfectionists interviewed by Slaney et al (2000) described being a perfectionist as instrumental to their success in a professional context. In explaining the relationship between perfectionism and performance, Stoeber (2012) identified high goals, increased effort, and the nature of the goals set (e.g., a focus on performance coupled with competence) as explanatory factors (Stoeber, 2012). These factors were evident in the accounts here to varying degrees. In addition, other factors were also mentioned, notably, a willingness to make sacrifices in their lives and prioritise the attainment of their goals to the detriment of other areas of their lives. While one might expect some sacrifice associated with reaching and maintaining high level performance in these domains, some of the sacrifices mentioned were of a more extreme nature and participants linked this directly to being a perfectionist. Again, the concept of sacrifice has

received little attention in research examining perfectionists and may provide further insight into its consequences in sport and the performing arts.

Most of the participants considered being a perfectionist to be a source of at least some distress. This ranged from being 'a little bit' stressful to being a source of 'massive amounts of distress'. Negative mental (e.g., worry), emotional (e.g., anxiety), and physical experiences (e.g., sleepless nights) were described by the participants. This is consistent with quantitative research that has found some dimensions of perfectionism to have a toll on adjustment and health (e.g., Dittner, Rimes, & Thorpe, 2011; Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015; Molnar, Sadava, Flett, & Colautti, 2012). Again, the accounts matched those reported by the academically gifted self-oriented perfectionists interviewed by Speirs Neumeister et al (2007) who reported similar negative emotional experiences, particularly in response to imperfection (e.g., becoming 'very angry'). The adverse consequences of being a perfectionist also manifested more widely in terms of poorer relationships with others, such as family and friends. Among research more widely, the potential for perfectionism to adversely influence relationships with others is prominent, especially when perfection is imposed on others (Stoeber, 2012). However, the accounts here suggest that even when perfectionism is internally driven, relationships might still suffer indirectly as individuals give less time and attention to others due to their obsessiveness and willingness to sacrifice.

The accounts were somewhat mixed in terms of whether the perfectionists' views aligned with the notions of healthy and unhealthy perfectionists. This is because neither label easily or adequately captures the varied experiences of the participants. Indeed, the idea that any of the participants being considered healthy or unhealthy perfectionists appears overly simplistic alongside the complexities they described. Rather, we found participants were best characterised

by a common set of beliefs and behaviours that were shared to varying degrees. Whether the benefits of being a perfectionist outweighed the drawbacks appeared to depend on the degree to which participants valued the outcomes associated with their perfectionistic tendencies and how they negotiated the challenges presented to them in their personal and professional lives. and negotiated the challenges presented to them in their personal and professional lives. In regards to this latter issue, it was apparent from the accounts of participants that sport and the performing arts hold a number of significant and unique challenges for perfectionists. These include the emphasis on public performance, need for extraordinary levels of dedication and practice, overt interpersonal competition, and achievement-related set-backs. In reflecting on the accounts of the participants, it is these unique features of the context, rather than any unique manifestations of perfectionism particular to sport and the performing arts, that were most apparent in shaping the experiences of the participants.

Limitations and future studies

The study had a number of limitations that should be addressed in future research. Consistent with our epistemological stance, we acknowledge that our interpretations, including the themes identified, are a result of our co-constructions and do not reflect ‘the’ truth in any objective sense. As such we also acknowledge that in this study, as in all research, preconceived notions/biases influence all phases of the research process. However, based upon the steps we have taken to ensure rigor, and by reviewing our interpretations of the rich description represented, we believe our interpretations can be considered fair and reasonable. We encourage researchers to corroborate or challenge our findings by detailing the accounts of other high-level athletes and performing artists who identify themselves as perfectionists.

There are also limitations associated with the use of self-identified perfectionists. As

described above, the accounts included a number of features that are evident in existing models and measures and other features that are less so. However, because we chose not to use any measures of perfectionism, it is not clear whether the participants would be considered perfectionists, to what degree, or what particular type of perfectionist they might be (e.g., a self-oriented perfectionist). Other qualitative research has shown that the accounts of perfectionists can vary depending on scores on quantitative measures (e.g., Gotwals & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2014). Therefore, it is possible that similarities and differences in the accounts provided may reflect differences in the amount and type of perfectionism exhibited by the participants. Future research should therefore consider using quantitative measures alongside qualitative methods to verify and triangulate the accounts of self-identified perfectionists with existing models.

Other limitations are also associated with the features of the participants. Two of the participants were retired. It is possible that their opinions/perceptions were influenced by the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, more so than the other participants at least. Such differences might be an interesting focus of future studies with current and retired athletes and performing artists having the potential to provide different and unique insights into the influence of being perfectionist across a career in these domains. In addition, all the current participants continued to negotiate the demands of high-level sport and the performing arts alongside being a perfectionist. The accounts of perfectionists unable to do so, and who have left these domains potentially due to the strain associated with being a perfectionist, are not represented here. Future research that documents the experiences of those who could not cope with the unique context of high-level sport and the performing arts may help to ensure that the full array of experiences of perfectionists is accounted for (see Flett & Hewitt, 2014).

Conclusion

This study is the first qualitative study in sport and the performing arts to elicit the opinions and perceptions of self-identified perfectionists. Being a perfectionist was characterised by high-level athletes, dancers, and musicians as highly motivational and a source of inner drive. In addition, being a perfectionist was perceived to provide greater capacity for success in their respective domains but, to varying degrees, also increased a sense of strain in their lives. The accounts suggest that, in the main, the content of current models and measures adequately capture the features of being a perfectionist in sport and performing arts. However, a greater focus on obsessiveness, dissatisfaction, and the intra- versus inter-personal dimensions of perfectionism would provide further insight into the lives of perfectionists in these domains.

Footnotes

[1] Discerning readers will have noted that when introducing the study we did not provide any specific definition of perfectionism. This is to give the opportunity to readers to draw their own conclusions regarding the essence of perfectionism based on the accounts of the participants. Readers are directed to Flett and Hewitt (2002) for an overview of the many definitions of perfectionism that have been developed by researchers in this area.

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Appendix

Interview schedule

1. To start us off, could you tell me how you became involved in sport/dance/music? And, what have been the highlights of your career so far?
2. Do you consider yourself a perfectionist?
    a. What is about yourself that makes you label yourself a perfectionist?
3. Have other people referred to you as a perfectionist?
    a. What do you think makes others label you a perfectionist?
4. What would you say are the main features of being a perfectionist?
5. How does being a perfectionist influence your life as an athlete/dancer/musician?
6. How does being a perfectionist influence other areas of your life?
7. What areas of your life would you say are most affected?
8. What, if any, are the benefits of being a perfectionist?
    a. How about specifically for you as a musician/dancer/athlete?
9. How much, if any, distress does being a perfectionist cause you?
10. Overall, would you give up being a perfectionist if you could?
    a. Could you explain why this is the case?
    b. Is there anything you would change about being a perfectionist?
11. Are there any issues about being a perfectionist you would like to raise that we haven't covered?