

Perfectionism and Giftedness: Examining the Connection

Michael C. Pyryt
Centre for Gifted Education
University of Calgary

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discuss current research regarding the construct of perfectionism, its measurement, its linkage with intellectual giftedness, and strategies for overcoming its negative effects.

The Construct of Perfectionism

In the past decade, clinicians have focused on the debilitating effects of perfectionism or perfectionistic thinking. For example, perfectionism has been identified as a possible cause of abdominal pain in children, alcoholism, anorexia, chronic olfactory paranoid syndromes, depression in children and adults, dysmorphophobia, erectile dysfunction, irritable bowel syndrome, Munchausen syndrome, obsessive compulsive personality disorders, Type A coronary-prone behavior, ulcerative colitis, and writer's block (Pacht, 1984). One of the difficulties in describing the construct of perfectionism is recognizing the multiple uses that occur in the literature. There is a fine line between striving to reach high standards of excellence and feeling self-defeated through the inability to reach unreasonable expectations. Some writers, deal with this dichotomy by contrasting two types of perfectionism. Bransky, Jenkins-Friedman, and Murphy (1987) distinguish between enabling perfectionism that empowers individuals and disabling perfectionism that cripples individuals. Hamachek (1978) distinguishes between normal and neurotic perfectionism. Other writers (Barrow & More, 1983; Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984) use perfectionism to refer to the negative aspects of the syndrome.

Barrow and Moore (1983) prefer the term perfectionistic thinking to perfectionism. Perfectionistic thinking is viewed as a cognitive pattern that many people use at various times to varying degrees. The word perfectionism implies a trait that an individual either has or doesn't have. Barrow & Moore (1983) have identified common elements of perfectionistic thinking. Frequently, dichotomous (all-or-none) thinking is present. One's efforts are either perfect or worthless. Another element of perfectionistic thinking is viewing goals as necessities rather than outcomes worth striving for. Desires (Wants) are transformed into demands (Musts). Often, perfectionistic thinking leads to focusing on unmet goals and challenges rather than savoring successes. Attention is placed on hurdles ahead rather than recognizing barriers cleared. Perfectionistic thinking leads to compulsiveness when less-than-perfect performance is attributed to permitting imperfections.

Measurement of Perfectionism

Scales to measure perfectionism have evolved from viewing perfectionism as a unidimensional construct to viewing perfectionism as a multidimensional construct. There are currently two instruments, both called the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, that assess the multidimensional aspects of perfectionism. These instruments which have different conceptions of perfectionism were developed by Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) and by Hewitt and Flett (1991). Frost et al. (1990) have developed a 35-item instrument that assesses six dimensions of perfectionism (concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticism, doubts about action, and organization. Hewitt and Flett (1991) developed a 45-item instrument that assesses three dimensions related to perfectionism (Self-oriented Perfectionism that focuses on excessively high self standards; Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism that addresses perceptions of standards and expectations set by others; and Other-Oriented Perfectionism that examines an individual's expectations for others). Both instruments have been found to demonstrate adequate psychometric properties. Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, and Neubauer (1993) administered these two instruments, among others, to a large sample of undergraduates. They identified two factors Maladaptive Evaluation Concerns and Positive Striving that accounted for 67% of the variance on the two instruments.

Perfectionism and Giftedness

Among educators of the gifted the link between giftedness and perfectionism is clearly established. The tendency toward perfectionism is an item on the most widely-used teacher rating scale for the identification of superior students (Renzulli, Smith, White, Callahan, & Hartman, 1976). Dealing with perfectionism among the gifted is often cited as one of the counseling needs of the gifted (Kerr, 1991; Silverman, 1993). Typically educators concerned with gifted children are concerned about two negative impacts of perfectionism: underachievement and emotional turmoil. In terms of underachievement, Whitmore (1980) reported that perfectionistic tendencies makes some gifted students vulnerable for underachievement because they do not submit work unless it is perfect. In terms of emotional stress, perfectionism is seen to cause feelings of worthlessness and depression when gifted individuals fail to live up to unrealistic expectations. DeLisle (1986, 1990) has provided anecdotal evidence that perfectionism places some gifted students at-risk for suicide.

Coping with Perfectionism Several things can be done to help individuals to effectively cope with perfectionism tendencies. First, individuals need to recognize that 80% of the reward structure comes from 20% of one's activities. This realization will help individuals concentrate on the few things that require extra effort. Second, individuals also need to develop the capacity for constructive failure by recognizing that present performance, even if imperfect,

sets the tone for future improvement. Third, individuals need to develop self-concepts separate from their products. They need to understand that they have inherent dignity and self-worth which is unconditional. Fourth, they should recognize that the commitment to excellence is a lifelong struggle and they need to view present circumstances as a step toward the future. Fifth, individuals with perfectionistic tendencies need to set realistic goals. Finally, perfectionistic individuals need to find avocational interests and pursuits that can bring joy.

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