Perfectionism, Self-Concept and Self-evaluative Emotions in Australian Primary School Students

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Perfectionism is defined as the striving for flawlessness (Flett & Hewitt, 2002), which has both adaptive and maladaptive components (Rice & Preusser, 2002). As the self-worth of perfectionists is contingent upon their performance (Burns, 1980) they constantly engage in self-evaluation and experience considerable variations in emotions (Tangney, 2002). To date most empirical studies on perfectionism have concentrated on the adult population (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990), with little information available on children. This study examined the relationship of perfectionism, self-concept and self-evaluative emotions in Australian primary school students by using age-appropriate instruments. Students at Years 4, 5, and 6 completed the Child-Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS, Flett & Hewitt, 1990), the Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale (AMPS, Rice & Preusser, 2002), the Self-Description Questionnaire I (SDQ-I, Marsh, 1990), and the Test of Self-Conscious Affect for Children (TOSCA-C, Tangney, Wagner, Burgraf, Gramzow & Fletcher, 1990). It has been hypothesized that maladaptive perfectionism will be negatively correlated with students’ academic, social and physical self-concept, and positively correlated with the self-evaluative emotions of shame and guilt. The research is being carried out and this paper reports the work-in-progress. As developing children’s self-worth and emotional well-being are important educational goals, the implications for teachers and school counsellors are discussed.

With a culture that values achievements and competitiveness, striving for excellence is often interpreted as striving for perfection. One of the characteristic features of a perfectionist is constant evaluation of personal performance against an internalised high standard. Obviously, this evaluation would have an impact on self perception with an accompanying emotional tone. This paper aims to address how the quest for perfectionism influences children’s self-concept and self-evaluative emotions could be researched.

Perfectionism

“Perfectionism”, as a personality construct, has been conceptualised as “the striving for flawlessness” (Flett & Hewitt, 2002), and “setting high personal standards” is identified as one of the core features of perfectionism (Accordino, Accordino & Slaney, 2000). In the pursuit of perfectionism, individuals often display some characteristic behavioural tendencies. Such characteristics include having a low tolerance for mistakes, having a preference for order and organization (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990), and a strong need for admiration (Rice & Preusser, 2002).

Traditionally, perfectionism is conceived as uni-dimensional and negative, based on its association with psychopathology such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders (Lundh, 2004, Blatt, 1995). This conceptualisation is usually represented by the psychoanalytic tradition or cognitive behavioural therapy group. They treated “perfectionism” either as a result of a harsh superego (e.g., Horney, 1937) or as cognitive distortions that should be disputed (e.g., Burns, 1980). Contemporary studies on perfectionism have conceptualized it as multidimensional, having both adaptive and maladaptive components. For instance, setting high personal standard and organization skills could be functional for personal achievement, whereas excessive concern about making mistakes, and self-criticism could be maladaptive (Rice & Preusser, 2002).

To date most empirical studies on perfectionism were conducted with adults (Frost Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990; Preusser, Rice & Ashby, 1994; Chang 2000). The investigation of perfectionism in children is a new endeavour (Hewitt, Caelian, Flett, Sherry, Collins & Flynn, 2002; Flett, Hewitt, Oliver & Macdonard, 2002; Rice, Kubal & Preusser, 2004). Many of the existing studies used instruments developed for adults (e.g., Einstein, Lovibond & Gaston, 2000). Hence, the study of children’s perfectionism, by using age-appropriate instrument, is vitally important.
Self-Concept

“Self-concept” can be regarded as an individual’s self-perceptions, which consists of sets of personal attributes, behavioural characteristics and competence. These self-attributes have both a descriptive and an evaluative nature (Piers & Harris, 1969, Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976). They are formed and modified by life experience and reinforcement based on internal evaluations by the individual and feedback from external evaluations by significant others (Marsh, 1988, Marsh & Ayotte, 2003).

Self-concept is also a multidimensional construct. Marsh & Ayotte (2003) reported that early primary children could differentiate the diverse facets of maths, reading, music and sport self-concepts, and their perceptions are not uniform. For instance, a child could simultaneously have a positive music self concept and a poor sport self concept. Hence, it would be more meaningful to consider each dimension of self concept separately rather than globally. Studies using a global self-concept often fail to detect differences as a result of the counterbalancing effects within specific dimensions of self-concept (Guerin, Marsh, & Famose, 2003).

It follows that the internalisation of perfectionist standards would have differential impacts on children’s academic self-efficacy, confidence about one’s physical appearance and physical abilities, and social relationships. An instrument that taps into the different dimensions of self-concept is needed to delineate the effects of perfectionism on different aspects of self-concept.

Self-evaluative Emotion

Human emotions are diverse. Besides the basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust (Ekman, Friesen & Ellsworth 1972), there are also emotions that are particularly relevant to the “self”. These are called “self-conscious emotions”. Examples of self-conscious emotions are embarrassment, shame, guilt and pride. Unlike other basic emotions which may be elicited by situational environment, the elicitor of self-conscious emotions is self-evaluation (Saarni, 1999).

The emergence of self-conscious or self-evaluative emotions in children is part of the normal social, emotional and moral development. These self-evaluative emotions function to regulate the child’s behaviour in compliance to cultural expectations (Saarni, 1999; Choy & Mohay, 2000). According to Lewis (2000), three processes are involved. Initially, the child need to understand and internalize the cultural standards that define the acceptability or desirability of how one thinks, feels and behaves. Then, the child will evaluate his/her behaviour, thoughts and feelings according to these standards. Finally the child will make an attribution of personal responsibility for the success or failure at meeting the standards. Positive attribution leads to the emotion of pride whereas negative attribution leads to shame or guilt.

Tangney (2002) further distinguished shame, guilt and pride. She defined “shame” as a result of negative evaluation of the global self, whereas “guilt” is the result of negative evaluation of specific behaviour. Parallel to the distinction of shame and guilt, she also proposed that “alpha pride” is resulted from positive evaluation of the global self, whereas “beta pride” is resulted from positive evaluation of specific behaviour.

Relationship Between Perfectionism, Self-Concept and Self-evaluative Emotions

To understand the dynamics of perfectionism, self-concept and self-evaluative emotions, Higgins’ (1987) self-discrepancy theory is helpful. Higgins described three representations of the “self”: (1) the “actual self” (i.e., the attributes the person believes he/she actually possesses), (2) the “ideal self” (i.e., the attributes the person hopes to possess ideally) and (3) the “ought self” (i.e., the attributes the person feels that he/she should possess). These different representations of self can be viewed from two perspectives, i.e., (1) the individual’s own standpoint and (2) the standpoint of significant others. In this theory, the “actual self” constitutes the “self-concept”, whereas the “ideal self” and the “ought self” refer to the standards for self evaluation. “Discrepancy” occurs when there is incongruence between an individual’s ideal attributes (i.e., the “ideal self” and/or the “ought self”) and his/her actual performance (i.e., “actual self”).

Early studies suggested that there was a tendency for perfectionists to base their self-worth on their accomplishments or performance (Barrow & Moore, 1983; Burns, 1980). This behavioural tendency is termed as “contingent self-esteem”. When perfectionists are satisfied with their performance (i.e., match between “actual self” and the “ideal self”), they have an enhanced self-esteem or a high self-worth. Conversely, when
perfectionists are not satisfied with their performance (i.e., discrepancy between “actual self” and “ideal self”), they have a decreased self-esteem or a low self-worth.

If self-worth is equated with performance, then on-going self-worth is based on the continuing achievement of perfectionistic standards (according to the “ideal self” and/or the “ought self”). However, life circumstances change and there is no guarantee that one will always perform at the highest level of standards. Consequently, the self-esteem of the individual will not remain constant. On the contrary, one’s self-worth is likely to fluctuate with different levels of accomplishments, ending up with an unstable self-concept, and are subjected to various emotional experiences. Discrepancy is usually experienced with accompanying negative emotions.

It has been suggested that perfectionists are especially familiar with self-conscious emotions because they constantly engaged in self-evaluation. As perfectionists are preoccupied with high standards and evaluation of self, meeting these standards contributes to positive feelings of pride, with a sense of mastery and accomplishment, and receiving social approval from others for fulfilling their expectations (Reissland, 1994). Alternatively, the attribution of inadequacy will lead to the experience of shame when it is attributed to the global self or guilt when it is attributed to a specific behaviour.

Previous adult studies supported this relationship. It has been shown that high personal standards by themselves did not associate with negative outcome. It is the combination of high standards and the perception of discrepancy between one’s actual performance and the standards for evaluation that was most detrimental (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000; Rice and Slaney, 2002). When perfectionism is based on a sense of contingent self-worth, they are vulnerable to emotional problems (Flett, Hewitt & Heisel, 2002). However, empirical research with children on self-conscious emotions is limited; there is no study that investigates the relationship between perfectionism, self-concept and self-evaluative emotions.

The present study

This study, therefore, seeks to extend our current understanding by examining the effects of perfectionism on self-concept and self-evaluative emotions in Australian primary school students in NSW. Unlike previous research, this study will use instruments designed and validated specifically for children. Specifically, this study aims to delineate the effects of different dimensions of perfectionism on the development of physical, social, and academic self concept and self-evaluative emotions of shame, guilt and pride in children.

Design

Participants

The participants in this study were 384 Australian mainstream primary school children (54.3% girls and 45.7% boys) from Years 4, 5, and 6. The age of participants ranged from 8 years 4 months to 12 years 10 months (M=10 years 5 months, SD = 10.73 months). They were recruited from three Western Sydney state primary schools in NSW, Australia.

Instruments

Four sets of questionnaire were used to assess perfectionism, self-concept and self-evaluative emotions. All the questionnaires have been validated as age-suitable for use with primary school children with a reading level of Year 3 or above. Hence, the items are readily understood by children in Year 4 to 6.

Two measures that are designed specifically to assess children’s perfectionism will be used, namely, CAPS and AMPS. These two scales have not been used together in any previous study on children’s perfectionism. The self concept will be assessed by SDQ-I, whereas the self-evaluative emotion will be assessed by TOSCA-C.
Perfectionism

The Child-Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS)

Within a multidimensional framework, Flett and Hewitt (1990) developed the Child-Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS) for children to measure the source of the high standards. This scale consists of two dimensions of perfectionism: (1) self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., the individual setting high standard of performance for oneself), and (2) socially-prescribed perfectionism (i.e., the individual’s perception of high expectations from significant others). CAPS (Flett & Hewitt, 1990) consists of 22 items and children are required to respond to a 5-point “true or false” scale. Examples of the items are:

- **Self-oriented perfectionism** (e.g., “I feel that I have to do my best all the time”) and
- **Socially-prescribed perfectionism** (e.g., “People around me expect me to be great at everything”).

Hewitt et al. (2002) reported the Cronbach’s alpha levels of .85 and .86 for self-oriented perfectionism and socially-prescribed perfectionism respectively.

Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale (AMPS)

Recently, Rice & Preusser (2002) developed another instrument to measure perfectionism in children, namely, the “Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale” (AMPS). Unlike CAPS, focusing on the source of the high standards, this scale focuses on the characteristic behaviour tendency manifested in the striving for perfection. Four dimensions were proposed: (1) Sensitivity to Mistakes (i.e., children’s fears associated with making mistakes), (2) Contingent Self-Esteem (i.e., positive feelings about the self when some the standards is met), (3) Compulsiveness (i.e., preferences for order and organization, conscientious and persistent approach to task completion), and Need for Admiration (i.e., interest in being recognised, admired and appreciated for exemplary work and high standards).

The AMPS consists of 27 items and examples of the items are:

- **Sensitivity to Mistakes** (e.g., “when I make a mistake, I feel so bad I want to hide”, “mistakes are OK to make”).
- **Contingent Self-Esteem** (e.g., “when one thing goes wrong, I wonder if I can do anything right”, “I like to help others after I do something well”).
- **Compulsiveness** (e.g., “I take a long time to do something because I check it many times”, “I only like to do one task at a time”).
- **Need for Admiration** (e.g., “I want to be perfect so that others think I am great”, “I want to be known as the best at what I do”).

The Cronbach’s coefficient alphas for AMPS ranged from .73 to .91 (Rice & Preusser, 2002).

Self-concept

Self-Description Questionnaire I (SDQ-I)

Children’s self concept is measured by Self-Description Questionnaire I (SDQ-I, Marsh, 1990). Marsh (1990) devised this instrument based on the multifaceted, hierarchical model of self concept developed by Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton (1976). This is a well-validated and widely-used Australian measure of multidimensional self-concept in pre-adolescent children. It consisted of academic self-concept (including reading, mathematics and general school) and non-academic self-concept (including physical ability, physical appearance, peer relations and parent relations). The combined academic and non-academic self-concept scores give a total self-concept score. Children will respond on a 5-point “true or false” scale. Examples of the items are:

- **Mathematics** (e.g., “Mathematics is one of my best subjects”),
- **Physical ability** (e.g., “I try to get out of sports and physical education classes whenever I can”),
- **Physical appearance** (e.g., “Nobody thinks that I’m good looking”),
- **Peer relations** (e.g., “I make friends easily with boys”),
- **Parent relations** (e.g., “I get along well with my parents”).

The internal consistency of the subscales of SDQ-I ranged from .80 to .94 (Marsh, 1988).
**Self-evaluative Emotion**

**Test of Self-Conscious Affect for Children (TOSCA-C)**

Self-evaluative emotions will be assessed by the Test of Self-Conscious Affect for Children (TOSCA-C, Tangney, Wagner, Burggraf, Gramzow & Fletcher, 1990). This instrument consists of 15 hypothetical daily situations (i.e., 10 negative and 5 positive valence scenarios) that measures children’s proneness to shame, proneness to guilt, externalisation of blame, detachment/unconcern, alpha pride (i.e., pride in global self), and beta pride (i.e., pride in specific behaviour). Items from the TOSCA-C were “subject-generated” where the scenarios and the affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses were drawn from written accounts of personal shame, guilt, and pride experiences provided by two samples of 8-12 year olds. The reliability Cronbach’s alpha has been demonstrated to be .78 for shame and .79 for guilt (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Examples of the answer options for the scenario of tripping in the cafeteria and spilling a friend’s drink are provided to indicate the emotional responses:

- **Shame-proneness** (e.g., “I’d be thinking that everyone is watching me and laughing”),
- **Guilt-proneness** (e.g., “I would feel sorry, very sorry. I should have watched where I was going”),
- **Detached/unconcern** (e.g., “I wouldn’t feel bad because milk doesn’t cost very much”),
- **Externalization of blame** (e.g., “I couldn’t help it. The floor was slippery”).

Children are required to respond on a 5-point Likert scale to indicate the likelihood of a particular response ranging from “Not very likely” to “Very likely”. For the present study, a few items in the TOSCA-C were reworded by school teachers in order to make them suitable for the Australian context and intelligible to Australian children. For instance, the American version of “I’d think ‘I’m a tattle-tale’” was changed to the Australian version of “I’d think ‘I am a dobber’”.

**Procedure**

Parental consent was obtained for each participant prior to the administration of the questionnaires. Items from the four questionnaires were read aloud to the students by the researcher in class. Students were required to write down their response. The order of the questionnaires was counterbalanced and short breaks for activity were incorporated between each questionnaire. The procedure took approximately 90 minutes to complete.

**Hypotheses**

It has been hypothesized that maladaptive perfectionism will be negatively correlated with students’ academic and non-academic self-concept, and positively correlated with the self-evaluative emotions of shame and guilt. Correlation and Multiple regression analysis will be used to analyse the data.

**Significance of study**

This study has both educational and scientific implications. Our competitive culture defines success in terms of how well students perform (Harackiewicz, 2004), and striving for excellence is often interpreted as striving for perfection or flawlessness. As students proceed from childhood to adulthood, they may experience increasing social pressure and expectations from their teachers, parents and peers to perform well in a wide range of areas. Once they have internalised these perfectionistic standards, how perfectionism influences students’ academic, social and physical self-concept and their experience of shame and guilt are of particular concerns for school counsellors and teachers.

Unfortunately, the majority of research on perfectionism has been conducted with adults, with very little information available on children. Moreover, little research had taken into account the multidimensional nature of perfectionism and self-concept. No previous study has examined the effects of perfectionism on self-concept and self-evaluative emotions in children. The present study aims to fill this gap of scientific knowledge by
delineating the impacts of different dimensions of perfectionism (including behavioural characteristics such as sensitivity to mistakes and contingent self-esteem, and sources of the standards such as self-oriented perfectionism and socially-prescribed perfectionism) on different aspects of self-concept (such as academic and non-academic self) and the accompanying self-evaluative emotions (such as shame and guilt). The present study, therefore, will provide the information necessary for identifying students at risk of experiencing maladaptive aspects of perfectionism, while recognising the adaptive aspects of perfectionism for the enhancement of self-esteem and emotional well-being.

According to the Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being, the most frequently used services children seek for emotional or behavioural difficulties were provided by school counsellors, family doctors or paediatricians (Sawyer, 2004). Hence, school counsellors and teachers play important roles in screening and early identification of emotional or behavioural problems, and supporting children’s well being. As suggested by Kottman & Ashby (2000), it is important for teachers and school counsellors to recognise both the positive (e.g., setting high standards and need for order) and negative (e.g., excessive self-criticism and sensitivity to mistakes) aspects of perfectionism in the school settings. They also need to acknowledge that perfectionistic behavioural tendencies occur on a continuum. This acknowledgement prevents teachers and school counsellors from labelling students as maladaptive perfectionists too hastily. Then they can make accurate assessment of how perfectionism impact on the students’ self-concept and the accompanying self-evaluative emotions.

To what extent is perfectionism desirable? Who defines it? From a functionistic point of view, maladaptiveness depends on whether the self-evaluation associates with setting unrealistic high standards, excessive self-criticism, procrastination and overwhelming shame. Adaptiveness depends on whether the self-evaluation associates with setting realistic standards, self-acceptance even though the standards are not met, motivation for achievement and appropriate level of guilt and pride. School counsellors and teachers play crucial roles in monitoring the intensity and pervasiveness of student’s perfectionistic needs. Where to draw the line is an art. It probably is a lifelong task to continue adding and deleting new perfectionistic standards. The present study could provide empirical evidence that might help to draw that line. In concurrence with the great Chinese educator and philosopher Confucius, who placed much emphasis on the way of “Zhong yong” or “Moderation”, perhaps perfectionism manifested in moderation could be regarded as adaptive and even constructive.

Conclusion

As the purpose of schooling is not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also about providing a supportive environment for the development of positive self-esteem and emotional well-being beyond the academic arenas (Masters, 2004), the present study ventures to identify how perfectionism influences children’s self-concept and self-evaluative emotions. Previous adult studies (Barrow & Moore, 1983; Higgins, 1987) suggested that the self-worth of perfectionists is contingent upon their performance, and constant self-evaluation might lead to variations in self-evaluative emotions, this study aim to clarify this relationship in a sample of Australian primary school students.

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