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PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism is a personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards for performance, accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations. It is a disposition that may pervade all areas of life, particularly areas in which performance plays as major role (e.g., work, school). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that perfectionism is a common characteristic in competitive athletes.

Perfectionistic Strivings and Perfectionistic Concerns

Traditionally perfectionism had been regarded as a sign of psychological maladjustment and mental disorder because people seeking help for depression and anxiety often report elevated levels of perfectionism. Traditional conceptions regarded perfectionism as a one-dimensional personality disposition. In the 1990s, however, a more differentiated view emerged conceptualizing perfectionism as multidimensional and multifaceted characteristic. From this view, a consensus has emerged that two main dimensions of perfectionism should be differentiated: perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings. Whereas the dimension representing perfectionistic concerns captures those aspects associated with concern over mistakes, fear of negative evaluation by others, feelings of discrepancy between one's expectations and performance, and negative reactions to imperfection, the dimension representing perfectionistic strivings captures those aspects of perfectionism associated with self-oriented striving for perfection and very high personal standards of performance.

The differentiation between the two dimensions is central to the understanding of perfectionism. Whereas the two dimensions are often highly correlated—most people who show elevated levels of perfectionistic concerns also show elevated levels of perfectionistic strivings—they show differential, and often contrasting, patterns of relationships. Perfectionistic concerns show strong and consistent negative relationships—that is, positive associations with negative characteristics, processes, and outcomes (e.g., neuroticism, maladaptive coping, negative affect) and indicators of psychological maladjustment and mental disorder (e.g., depression). In contrast, perfectionistic strivings often show positive relationships—that is, positive associations with positive characteristics, processes, and outcomes (e.g., conscientiousness, adaptive coping,

positive affect) and indicators of subjective well-being and good psychological adjustment (e.g., satisfaction with life).

The differentiation between the two dimensions is of central importance also in sport and exercise psychology where perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings show different, sometimes opposite, relationships with emotion, motivation, and performance. Like in the general perfectionism literature, however, the positive associations of perfectionistic strivings are often “masked” because of the overlap with perfectionistic concerns and may show only when the negative influence of perfectionistic concerns is controlled for (e.g., by computing partial correlations controlling for the overlap between the two dimensions). Consequently, it is important for studies in sport and exercise psychology investigating perfectionism to use statistical analyses that control for the overlap between the two dimensions (e.g., partial correlations, multiple regression) to uncover the often marked differences the two dimensions show.

Emotion

In the general perfectionism literature, a frequent and well-replicated finding is that perfectionistic concerns are associated with negative affect whereas perfectionistic strivings are associated with positive affect. The same holds for perfectionism in sports regarding general affect and specific affective experiences. For example, research using imagined scenarios to investigate how athletes respond to success and failure in important competitions found that, when the overlap between the two dimensions was controlled for, perfectionistic concerns were associated with negative affect after failure whereas perfectionistic strivings were associated with positive affect after success. Differential relationships of the two perfectionism dimensions have also been found for competitive anxiety, an important emotion frequently experienced by competitive athletes that has received much attention in sport psychology. In the literature, three aspects of competitive anxiety are usually differentiated: cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and self-confidence. Cognitive anxiety represents the side of competitive anxiety involving negative cognitions about possible failure, and somatic anxiety represents the side involving perceptions of bodily symptoms and heightened negative arousal. In contrast, self-confidence involves positive cognitions and feelings indicating that one is up to the task and capable of giving one’s best possible performance. Consequently, self-confidence in competitions is a sign of low competitive anxiety and has shown positive relationships with performance. A number of studies have examined the relationships between perfectionism and competitive anxiety in athletes. Overall findings show that only perfectionistic concerns are associated with higher levels of

cognitive and somatic anxiety and lower levels of self-confidence. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings (once the overlap with perfectionistic concerns is controlled for) are associated with low levels of cognitive and somatic anxiety and high levels of self-confidence, suggesting that athletes who strive for perfection (and are not overly concerned about not achieving perfection) approach competitions with a positive mindset that may help them achieve a higher performance.

Motivation

Motivation is another key variable in sport psychology, particularly achievement motivation. An important predictor of athletes' achievement motivation are achievement motives. Achievement motives are stable individual differences in learned, affectively charged anticipatory responses to achievement situations that energize and direct people's behaviors. Research traditionally differentiates between two achievement motives: hope of success (motivating people to achieve success) and fear of failure (motivating people to avoid failure). Mirroring the findings from the competitive anxiety literature, studies controlling for the overlap between the two perfectionism dimensions have found that only perfectionistic concerns were positively associated with fear of failure. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings were positively associated with hope of success (and negatively with fear of failure), suggesting that perfectionistic strivings are associated with a positive mindset regarding achievement situations that may help athletes attain success whereas perfectionistic concerns are associated with a negative mindset focusing on possible failure.

Another variable closely associated with achievement motivation is achievement goal orientation. Like with achievement motives, perfectionistic strivings and concerns show a clear differential pattern with achievement goal orientations, particularly when the 2×2 model of achievement goals is considered. The 2×2 model differentiates two dimensions of goal orientation—definition (performance vs. mastery) and valence (approach vs. avoidance)—resulting in four different goals: performance-approach, performance-avoidance, mastery-approach, and mastery-avoidance goals. Performance-approach goals represent the motivation to demonstrate normative competence (e.g., striving to do better than others), performance-avoidance goals the motivation to avoid demonstrating normative incompetence (e.g., striving to avoid doing worse than others), mastery-approach goals the motivation to achieve absolute or intrapersonal competence (e.g., striving to master a task), and mastery-avoidance goals the motivation to avoid absolute or intrapersonal incompetence (e.g., striving to avoid doing worse than one has done previously). A number of studies have investigated the

relationships between the two dimensions of perfectionism and the 2×2 goals. Across studies results showed that, when partial correlations were computed controlling for the overlap between the two dimensions, perfectionistic concerns showed positive correlations with performance-avoidance and mastery-avoidance goals indicating that perfectionistic concerns are associated with avoidance motivation in competitive achievement situations. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings showed positive correlations with performance-approach and mastery-approach goals, indicating that perfectionistic strivings are associated with an approach motivation.

Performance

The findings that perfectionistic concerns are associated with a negative mindset and avoidance motivation in competitive situations whereas perfectionistic strivings are associated with a positive mindset and approach motivation suggest that the two dimensions of perfectionism also show different relationships with performance. Unfortunately only few studies so far have investigated perfectionism and sport performance, and the findings they have produced are not as clear-cut as those of the studies regarding emotion and motivation. On the one hand, there are findings that corroborate the many findings from the general perfectionism literature that perfectionistic strivings are associated with higher performance: In a study investigating basketball training performance, perfectionistic strivings were associated with higher performance across a series of trials in a new, non-standard training task; and in two studies investigating race performance of triathletes, perfectionistic strivings predicted higher race performance beyond what was expected from athletes' previous performance (seasonal/personal best). On the other hand, there are findings indicating that both perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings are detrimental to performance. In a study investigating athletes' psychomotor performance in a balancing task (stabilometer performance) under laboratory conditions when false performance feedback is given (athletes were told they were performing below expectations), both dimensions of perfectionism were associated with lower performance. Finally, there are findings indicating that both dimensions of perfectionism can enhance performance and lead to performance improvements. In the study investigating basketball training performance, athletes who had high levels of perfectionistic strivings and high levels of perfectionistic concerns—which is a combination of the two perfectionism dimensions that most theory and research in perfectionism would consider unhealthy, maladaptive, or dysfunctional—showed the greatest performance improvements across the trials. With this it appears that—if we disregard the laboratory study with false performance

feedback—perfectionistic strivings are not detrimental to sport performance. On the contrary, perfectionistic strivings may be associated with higher performance in training and competitions.

Open Questions and Future Research

Perfectionism is a characteristics that can have important implications for athletes' well-being, their emotional experiences and motivational orientations, and their performance in training and competitions. Yet, compared to research in general perfectionism, research on perfectionism in sport is still underdeveloped, and there remain many open questions for future research. First, we still know little about how individual differences in perfectionism develop. Second, we do not know anything about the long-term consequences of perfectionism in sport. In particular, we need to learn more about the long-term consequences of perfectionistic strivings on performance, as some researchers have suggested that perfectionistic strivings—while boosting performance in the short run—are detrimental to sustained performance and athletic development because they may have negative consequences in the long run (e.g., athlete burnout). Third, we need to know more about how perfectionism affects teams (e.g., team cohesion, team performance). While a number of studies have investigated perfectionism in athletes engaged in team sports, these studies have focused on how individual athletes' perfectionism affects the individual athletes, but not how it affects the team. Finally, so far most of the research on perfectionism in sport and exercise psychology has focused on sport, and only very few studies have looked into exercise. More studies are needed to investigate what role perfectionism plays in physical activity and exercise behavior.

Conclusion

Although some researchers suggest that perfectionism in sports is a negative characteristic because it undermines athletes' performance and stifles athletic development, empirical evidence shows that perfectionism has a dual nature with negative and positive sides. This dual nature is represented in the two main dimensions of perfectionism—perfectionistic concerns and perfectionistic strivings—that show different and unique relationships with athletes' emotion, motivation, and performance. The pattern of findings suggests that only perfectionistic concerns are clearly maladaptive. In contrast, perfectionistic strivings are associated with emotional and motivational qualities that may give athletes an additional “boost” to make an extra effort and achieve the best possible result. Even some clinical psychologists are beginning to recognize that perfectionistic strivings may form part of a healthy pursuit of excellence and, as such, are not unhealthy, dysfunctional, or maladaptive. However, this may

only be the case when perfectionistic strivings are not accompanied by perfectionistic concerns, because perfectionistic concerns are clearly unhealthy and maladaptive and—while they may have no direct negative effects on sport performance—represent a serious risk to athletes' psychological well-being and their motivation, self-esteem, and health.

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See also [keywords added from other encyclopedia entries]

FURTHER READINGS

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