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Perfectionism and Social Desirability:

Students Report Increased Perfectionism to Create a Positive Impression

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Abstract

Because previous studies examining correlations between perfectionism and social desirability produced inconclusive findings, this study used an experimental approach examining the perceived social desirability of perfectionism. 117 university students were randomly assigned to three conditions (fake-good, standard, and fake-bad instructions) and then completed measures of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Results showed that all three forms of perfectionism were perceived as socially desirable. Self-oriented perfectionism showed a strong linear trend across the conditions: Students reported significantly higher self-oriented perfectionism in the fake-good condition, and significantly lower self-oriented perfectionism in the fake-bad condition compared to standard instructions. Other-oriented perfectionism showed the same linear trend, albeit weaker, and only fake-good and fake-bad conditions differed significantly. Socially prescribed perfectionism too showed a significant linear trend: Students reported higher levels in the fake-good condition compared to standard instructions and fake-bad condition, with no significant difference between the latter conditions. The findings indicate that, in educational settings, students perceive perfectionism—including maladaptive forms such as socially prescribed perfectionism—as socially desirable.

Keywords: positive striving perfectionism; maladaptive evaluation concerns perfectionism; impression management; self-enhancement; self-depreciation

1. Introduction

1.1 Multidimensional 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 of one's behavior (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). Research has shown that perfectionism is best conceptualized as a multidimensional characteristic (see Enns & Cox, 2002, for a review). One widely-researched conceptualization of multidimensional perfectionism is Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model, differentiating three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism comprises a person's beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important; it is characterized by having perfectionistic expectations for oneself. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism involves beliefs that it is important others meet one's high standards for performance; it is characterized by having perfectionistic expectations of others. Socially prescribed perfectionism comprises beliefs that high standards are expected by others and acceptance by others is conditional on fulfilling these standards; it is characterized by individuals' perceptions that others have perfectionistic expectations of them that they must fulfill.

Research has shown that when different measures of multidimensional perfectionism are combined in a factor analysis, two superordinate factors emerge: one factor called "positive striving perfectionism" and one called "maladaptive evaluation concerns perfectionism" (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993). The first factor captures "good perfectionism" (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004) and has shown positive correlations with conscientiousness whereas the second factor captures "bad perfectionism" and has shown positive correlations with

neuroticism (see Stoeber & Otto, 2006, for a review). Across studies, self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism always formed part of the first factor whereas socially prescribed perfectionism always formed part of the second (see again Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

1.2 Multidimensional Perfectionism and Social Desirability

Social desirability is an individual difference variable aiming to capture respondents' tendency to over-report "good" and under-report "bad" behaviors and characteristics so others will view them favorably (e.g., Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Because positive striving perfectionism is seen as "good" and conscientiousness has shown positive correlations with social desirability whereas maladaptive evaluation concerns perfectionism is seen as "bad" and neuroticism has shown negative correlations with social desirability (e.g., Stöber, 2001), it could be expected that self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism would show positive correlations with social desirability scores whereas socially prescribed perfectionism would show negative correlations. However, findings so far have been inconclusive. In a study with university students (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism showed negative correlations with social desirability scores, which suggests that students perceived higher levels of other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism as less socially desirable than lower levels. This finding, however, failed to replicate in a study with psychiatry patients (Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan, & Mikail, 1991) where all three forms of perfectionism showed nonsignificant correlations with social desirability scores.

1.3 The Present Study

Whereas the interpretation of high social desirability scores as "faking" is debated (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1983), it is unquestionable that responses to personality questionnaire can be faked if respondents intend, or are instructed, to do so. For example, when Furnham (1997)

asked students to fake good and bad responses to a questionnaire measuring the Big Five personality traits, students reported higher conscientiousness and lower neuroticism in the fake-good condition, and lower conscientiousness and higher neuroticism in the fake-bad condition, compared to standard instructions. This suggests that students perceived higher levels of conscientiousness and lower levels of neuroticism as more socially desirable. Consequently, the aim of the present study was to examine the perceived social desirability of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism using the same experimental approach Furnham and others used investigating how students react to instructions to create a good (“fake good”) or bad (“fake bad”) impression compared to standard instructions. Because previous studies using a correlational approach (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 1991) produced inconclusive findings that partly contradicted expectations one may have based on the three forms’ associations with “good” versus “bad” perfectionism (Bieling et al., 2004), the study was largely exploratory.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

117 students (26 male, 91 female) were recruited at our university using the School of Psychology’s Research Participation Scheme (RPS). Mean age of students was 20.1 years ($SD = 3.7$; range: 18-44 years). Students volunteered to participate in the study for RPS credits or a raffle for £50 (~US \$80) and completed all measures online using the School’s Qualtrics® system.

2.2 Procedure

Stratified by gender, students were randomly allocated to three conditions: fake-good, standard, and fake-bad. Adapting the instructions Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, and Butera (2009) used to investigate social desirability of achievement goals in university students,

students in the fake-good condition received the following instructions:

Create a good image of yourself—as judged by your lecturers. As you fill in the following questionnaires, we would like you to try and generate a good image of yourself, that is, to answer in such a way as to be judged in a positive way by your lecturers. More specifically, as you indicate your level of agreement with each of the following propositions, you should try and generate a good image of yourself.

Students in the standard condition received the instructions that they should respond honestly how they personally see themselves: “We would like you to indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements. We are interested in how you personally see yourself, so please answer honestly.” Students in the fake-bad condition received the same instructions as students in the fake-good condition, except that the words “good” and “positive” were replaced with the words “bad” and “negative.”

Afterwards, students completed the measures of perfectionism and social desirability (see Section 2.3). Two students, who gave uniform answers (showing zero variance in their answers to the perfectionism and/or impression management items) were removed from the analyses. With this, our final sample comprised 115 students: 38 (8 male, 30 female) in the fake-good, 39 (9 male, 30 female) in the standard, and 38 (8 male, 30 female) in the fake-bad condition.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Perfectionism.

To measure perfectionism we used the short form of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; short form: Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002) capturing self-oriented (5 items; e.g., “I am perfectionistic in setting my goals”), other-oriented (5 items; e.g., “I do not have very high standards for those around me,” reverse-scored), and socially prescribed

perfectionism (5 Items; e.g., “People expect nothing less than perfection from me”). Students responded to the items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Scale scores were computed by averaging responses across items. All scores showed satisfactory reliability: self-oriented perfectionism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .97$), other-oriented perfectionism ($\alpha = .82$), and socially prescribed perfectionism ($\alpha = .71$).

2.3.2 Impression management

To measure social desirability, we used the 10-item short form of the impression management scale from the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (Paulhus, 1994; short form: Musch, Brockhaus, & Bröder, 2002) capturing positive impression management (e.g., “I never take things that don’t belong to me”). Students responded on a scale from 1 (*not true*) to 7 (*very true*). Scores were computed by averaging responses across items using continuous scoring (Stöber, Dette, & Musch, 2002) and showed satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .89$).

3. Results

3.1 Impression management

First, we checked if the experimental manipulation was successful by computing an ANOVA on impression management with condition (fake good, standard, fake bad) as between-subjects factor which showed a significant main effect and linear trend (Table 1). As intended, participants in the fake-good condition had higher, and participants in the fake-bad condition lower impression management scores than participants in the standard condition, indicating that the manipulation was successful.

3.2 Perfectionism

Next, we computed a MANOVA with condition as between-subjects factor and the three forms of perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, socially prescribed) as dependent variables

which showed a significant main effect for condition, $F(2, 112) = 15.17, p < .001$, and a significant condition \times perfectionism interaction, Wilk's Lambda $F(4, 222) = 6.69, p < .001$, indicating that the instructions had different effects on the three forms. This was confirmed when the interaction was plotted (Figure 1) and follow-up ANOVAS were conducted (Table 1). Self-oriented perfectionism showed a significant main effect and linear trend: Students reported higher self-oriented perfection in the fake-good condition and lower self-oriented perfectionism in the fake-bad condition than under standard instructions. Other-oriented perfectionism too showed a significant linear trend, but no significant main effect: Students reported higher other-oriented perfectionism in the fake-good condition than in the fake-bad condition, but the two conditions did not differ significantly from the standard condition. Socially prescribed perfectionism again showed a significant main effect and linear trend: Students reported higher socially prescribed perfectionism following fake-good instructions compared to standard and fake-bad instructions, but the latter two conditions did not differ significantly.

3.3 Gender

To test for potential gender effects, we recomputed the MANOVA described in Section 3.2 including gender as an additional between-subjects factor. The main effect and all interaction effects of gender were nonsignificant with $F < 1$, indicating that gender had no effect on the results described in Section 3.2.

4. Discussion

Using an experimental approach to investigate the social desirability of multidimensional perfectionism, this study allocated students to three conditions—fake-good, standard, and fake-bad instructions—before answering measures of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Results showed that all three forms of perfectionism were regarded as

socially desirable: When asked to present a good image of themselves in the eyes of their lecturers, students reported higher levels of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism compared to standard or fake-bad instructions.

The findings are in line with Bieling et al.'s (2004) findings that self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism form part of "good perfectionism" (and thus should be more socially desirable), but not with socially prescribed perfectionism's forming part of "bad perfectionism" (and thus should be less socially desirable). However, the findings are in line with an observation Guignard, Jacquet, and Lubart (2012) made when investigating perfectionism in gifted school students because they observed abnormally high levels of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism scores when questionnaires were administered in the presence of a teacher. They interpreted the observation as showing that students perceived both self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism as socially desirable in educational settings. (Guignard and colleagues did not investigate other-oriented perfectionism.)

The present findings are particularly noteworthy for socially prescribed perfectionism, because they run contrary to expectations that socially prescribed perfectionism should be perceived as a "bad" form of perfectionism and contrary to Hewitt and Flett's (1991) finding that socially prescribed perfectionism showed a significant negative correlation with social desirability. The reason for the different findings may lie in the different methods used: Hewitt and Flett used a correlational approach measuring social desirability with a social desirability scale whereas we used an experimental approach manipulating social desirability by asking students to create a good impression of themselves in the eyes of their university lecturers. Hence, our findings (like Guignard and colleagues' observation) indicate that students perceive socially prescribed perfectionism as a characteristic that—like having high achievement goals

(Darnon et al., 2009)—is socially desirable in educational settings.

The present study has a number of limitations. First, we did not measure perfectionism prior to the experimental manipulation. Hence we could not examine if students' dispositional perfectionism moderated the effects that the experimental manipulation had on how socially desirable students perceived the different forms of perfectionism. Moreover, we did not measure perfectionistic self-presentations (Hewitt et al., 2003) and hence could not examine their potential influence on the findings. Third, future studies need to examine if the findings are restricted to the university context, where students are expected to have high standards and strive for "excellence," or if they generalize to other domains (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Finally, the study is limited to Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of multidimensional perfectionism. Whereas this model dominates much of perfectionism research, there are other widely-researched models (e.g., Frost et al.'s, 1990) that measure aspects of "bad perfectionism," such as concern over mistakes and doubts about actions, that may not show increased levels when students are asked to create a positive impression.

Despite these limitations, the present findings have important implications for the understanding of multidimensional perfectionism as they indicate that students perceive perfectionism to be a personality characteristic that is socially desirable in educational settings, and this may include dimensions of perfectionism that are generally regarded as maladaptive such as socially prescribed perfectionism.

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Table 1
Mean Differences Between Conditions, Main Effects, and Linear Trends

Variable	Condition			ANOVA	
	Fake good	Standard	Fake bad	Main effect	Linear trend
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		
Impression management	4.31 _a (1.44)	3.63 _b (0.77)	2.41 _c (1.26)	25.20***	48.88***
Perfectionism					
Self-oriented perfectionism	5.47 _a (1.10)	4.63 _b (1.45)	3.22 _c (2.24)	17.91***	34.98***
Other-oriented perfectionism	4.52 _a (1.24)	4.14 _{a,b} (1.13)	3.85 _b (1.67)	2.34	4.66*
Socially prescribed perfectionism	4.37 _a (1.09)	3.36 _b (1.14)	3.60 _b (1.43)	6.93**	7.50**

Note. $N = 115$ (fake good and standard: $n = 38$ each; fake bad: $n = 39$). All scores are mean scores on a 1-7 answer scale (see Section 2.3.1). Means with different subscripts (row-wise) differ significantly at $p < .05$. ANOVA F values with $df = 2, 112$ (main effect) and $df = 1, 112$ (linear trend [unweighted means]).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

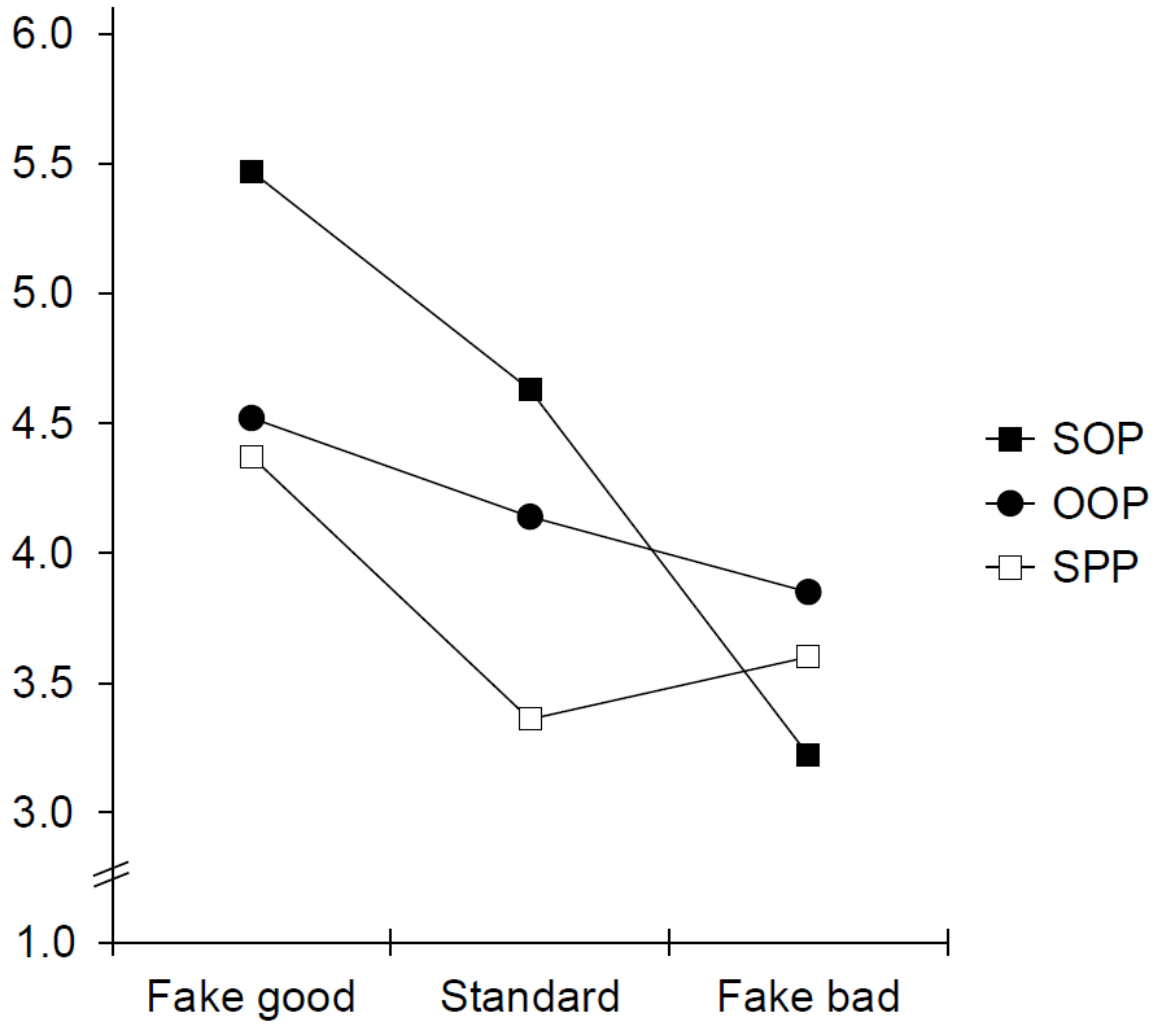


Figure 1. Interaction effect of condition \times perfectionism. SOP = self-oriented perfectionism, OOP = other-oriented perfectionism, SPP = socially prescribed perfectionism. y-axis = mean response on an answer scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).