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## The Psychology of Perfectionism: An Introduction

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### Overview

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality disposition characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting exceedingly high standards of performance accompanied by overly critical evaluations of one's behavior. Perfectionism is a complex characteristic. It comes in different forms and has various aspects. This chapter has a dual purpose: It aims to serve as an introduction to "The Psychology of Perfectionism" (the edited book you are holding in your hands) and an introduction to the psychology of perfectionism (what the book is about). To these aims, I first present a brief history of perfectionism theory and research. Then I introduce the two-factor theory of perfectionism—differentiating perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns—with the intention to provide readers with a conceptual framework that may serve as a "compass" guiding them through the different models and measures of perfectionism they will encounter in this book. Going beyond the two-factor model, I next introduce three aspects of perfectionism that are important for a comprehensive understanding of perfectionism: other-oriented perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and perfectionism cognitions. The chapter will conclude with a brief overview of the organization of the book and the contents of the individual chapters.

### A Caveat

There is, however, a caveat. This introductory chapter is unlikely to present an unbiased account of perfectionism research. Perfectionism is a multifaceted personality characteristic, and—as the chapters of the book will demonstrate—different researchers have different views of perfectionism. Accordingly, the present chapter reflects the personal views I have acquired over the near 20 years since I took the first stab at perfectionism research (Stöber, 1998), and they are views that the authors of the other chapters may share, share in parts, or not share. However, readers should also be aware that, despite differences in the views of perfectionism, there is lots of common ground. I personally like to think that—if we as perfectionism researchers take everything that is published on perfectionism into account—95% of our views are in agreement. The problem is that we can passionately disagree about the remaining 5%, making the

discrepancies appear much larger (and perhaps more important) than they actually are. But enough of the preliminaries. Let's get started! And what would be a better start than having a look at the origins of perfectionism theory and how perfectionism research developed?

### **A Brief History of Perfectionism Theory and Research**

The origins of perfectionism research are based in psychodynamic theory, particularly in the writings of two prominent psychoanalytic theorists: Alfred Adler (\*1870-†1937) and Karen Horney (\*1885-†1952). Horney (1950) described perfectionism as “the tyranny of the should” (p. 64) and regarded it as a highly neurotic personality disposition void of any positive aspects. In comparison, Adler had a more differentiated view of perfectionism. In fact, Akay-Sullivan, Sullivan, and Bratton (2016) recently pointed out that Adler may be regarded as one of the first to have a multidimensional view of perfectionism recognizing adaptive and maladaptive aspects in relation to mental health. According to Adler, “the striving for perfection is innate in the sense that it is a part of life, a striving, an urge, a something without which life would be unthinkable” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 104), but individuals attempt to achieve the goal of perfection differently, and their individual attempts can be differentiated by their functional and dysfunctional behaviors toward this goal (Akay-Sullivan et al., 2016).

Then came many years that did not see much progress in perfectionism theory except for a few psychiatric writings on perfectionism (e.g., Hollender, 1965; Missildine, 1963) leading Hollender (1978) to make the observation that perfectionism was “a neglected personality trait.” The same year, however, an influential theoretical article on perfectionism was published. Hamachek (1978) suggested that two forms of perfectionism should be differentiated: a positive form he labeled “normal perfectionism” whereby individuals enjoy pursuing their perfectionistic strivings, and a negative form labeled “neurotic perfectionism” whereby individuals suffer from their perfectionistic strivings. Furthermore, two years later, the first self-report measure of perfectionism was published—Burns' (1980) Perfectionism Scale—followed by another measure three years later—the perfectionism subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983)—and empirical research into perfectionism could begin in earnest.

The problem with these measures, however, was that they conceptualized perfectionism as a one-dimensional construct. Moreover, the measures followed Horney's conception of perfectionism as a highly neurotic disposition. Accordingly, they exclusively captured neurotic and dysfunctional aspects of perfectionism reflecting the at the time prominent view that perfectionism was a “kind of psychopathology” (Pacht, 1984, p. 387). This view, however, must

not have been very inspiring because publications on perfectionism in the 1980s continued to be few and far between (see Figure 1.1).

[Insert Figure 1.1 about here.]

But all this changed at the beginning of the 1990s, and dramatically so. The reason for this was that two research teams (independently of each other) published multidimensional models of perfectionism and associated multidimensional measures. Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) published a model differentiating six dimensions of perfectionism: personal standards, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, parental criticism, and organization. Personal standards reflect perfectionists' exceedingly high standards of performance. Concern over mistakes capture perfectionists' fear about making mistakes and the negative consequences that mistakes have for their self-evaluation, whereas doubts about actions capture a tendency towards indecisiveness related to an uncertainty about doing the right thing. In contrast, parental expectations and parental criticism refer to perfectionists' perceptions that their parents expected them to be perfect and were critical if they failed to meet these expectations. Finally, organization captures tendencies to be organized and value order and neatness. At the same time, Hewitt and Flett (1990, 1991) published a model differentiating three forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism comprises internally motivated beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important. Self-oriented perfectionists expect to be perfect. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism comprises internally motivated beliefs that it is important for others to strive for perfection and be perfect. Other-oriented perfectionists expect others to be perfect. Finally, socially prescribed perfectionism comprises externally motivated beliefs that striving for perfection and being perfect are important to others. Socially prescribed perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004).

### **Perfectionistic Strivings and Perfectionistic Concerns**

Whereas the two models suggest different dimensions (and the different dimensions stress different aspects of multidimensional perfectionism), there are common aspects as Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, and Neubauer (1993) demonstrated in a seminal article. Frost and colleagues subjected the nine dimensions of the two models to a factor analysis (Kline, 1994), and two higher-order dimensions emerged. One dimension (Dimension 1) combined personal standards, organization, self-oriented perfectionism, and other-oriented perfectionism. The other

dimension (Dimension 2) combined concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, parental criticism, and socially prescribed perfectionism. What is more, when the two dimensions were correlated with measures of positive affect, negative affect, and depression, Dimension 1 showed a positive correlation with positive affect (and nonsignificant correlations with negative affect and depression) whereas Dimension 2 showed positive correlations with negative affect and depression (and a nonsignificant correlation with positive affect). Consequently, Frost and colleagues labeled Dimension 1 “positive striving” and Dimension 2 “maladaptive evaluation concerns,” and so the two-factor model of perfectionism was born.

The two-factor structure of perfectionism and the two higher-order dimensions proved to be reliable (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004). Further, the structure replicated across different multidimensional measures of perfectionism (e.g., R. W. Hill et al., 2004) and also emerged when items taken from various multidimensional measures were combined (Stairs, Smith, Zapolski, Combs, & Settles, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the two-factor model can be regarded as a conceptual framework providing guidance for understanding the different, sometimes opposing, relationships that various dimensions of perfectionism show with indicators of psychological adjustment and maladjustment. Following Frost et al.’s (1993) suggestion that one dimension was “positive” and the other “maladaptive,” a practice developed whereby researchers gave the two dimensions labels with evaluative connotations such as adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, healthy and unhealthy perfectionism, positive and negative perfectionism, and functional and dysfunctional perfectionism. Fortunately, this practice is declining and nowadays the two dimensions are usually referred to as personal standards perfectionism and evaluative concerns perfectionism (Dunkley, Blankstein, Halsall, Williams, & Winkworth, 2000) or perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). This is preferable because the question of whether, and to what degree, the two dimensions are adaptive (healthy, positive, functional) or maladaptive (unhealthy, negative, dysfunctional) should be an empirical question (see also Gaudreau, 2013). Further, I personally prefer referring to the two dimensions as perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns to indicate that they are two dimensions of the same construct (perfectionism), and not two different forms of perfectionism.

Table 1.1 shows what aspects of different multidimensional models of perfectionism—

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<sup>1</sup>In fact, the two dimensions even emerged in perfectionism measures conceptualized to be one-dimensional (e.g., Sherry, Hewitt, Besser, McGee, & Flett, 2004; Stoeber & Damian, 2014)!

represented by subscales from the associated multidimensional measures—are regarded as indicators (or “proxies”) of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns across different multidimensional measures of perfectionism. Consequently, the table may serve as a compass guiding readers through the different models and measures of perfectionism they will encounter in the various chapters of this book. However, when inspecting the table, attentive readers may wonder what happened to other-oriented perfectionism, parental expectations, parental criticism, and organization all of which were originally included in the two-factor model (Frost et al., 1993). The answer (in a nutshell) is that other-oriented perfectionism is better regarded as a form of perfectionism outside the two-factor model because it is directed at others, not the self (Stoeber, 2014, 2015). Parental expectations and criticism are better regarded as developmental antecedents of perfectionistic strivings and concerns, rather than defining components (Damian, Stoeber, Negru, & Băban, 2013; Rice, Lopez, & Vergara, 2005). And organization was never regarded as a core dimension of perfectionism to begin with (cf. Frost et al., 1990), and there are factor analyses showing organization and order to form a third factor separate from perfectionistic strivings and concerns (Kim, Chen, MacCann, Karlov, & Kleitman, 2015; Suddarth & Slaney, 2001).

[Insert Table 1.1 about here.]

The two-factor model of perfectionism—differentiating perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns—represents an important framework for understanding how perfectionism can be adaptive and maladaptive (see Chapters 2-3, 8, and 11-12). Moreover, it represents the foundation of the  $2 \times 2$  model of perfectionism (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010) which examines how within-person combinations of high versus low perfectionistic strivings  $\times$  high versus low perfectionistic concerns differ with respect to psychological adjustment and maladjustment (as detailed in Chapter 3). There are, however, important aspects of perfectionism going beyond perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns that need to be taken into account for a comprehensive understanding of perfectionistic behavior (cf. Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, 2017): other-oriented perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and perfectionism cognitions.

### **Beyond Perfectionistic Strivings and Perfectionistic Concerns**

Other-oriented perfectionism was introduced to perfectionism theory and research over 25 years ago and is an essential part of the tripartite model of perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1990,

1991). Despite this, other-oriented perfectionism did not receive the same attention from research on multidimensional perfectionism as self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, and in fact was often disregarded (Stoeber, 2014). This, however, has changed in recent years which saw a reinvigorated interest in other-oriented perfectionism. There are a number of contributing factors. First, other-oriented perfectionism plays an important role in the perfectionism social disconnection model (Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, & Caelian, 2006) and its recent extensions (see Chapters 9 and 15). Second, it is a key aspect of all forms of perfectionism where perfectionistic expectations of others are important such as dyadic perfectionism (Stoeber, 2012) and team perfectionism (A. P. Hill, Stoeber, Brown, & Appleton, 2014). Moreover, the interest in so-called “dark personality traits” (Marcus & Zeigler-Hill, 2015) has directed attention to other-oriented perfectionism because of its associations with the dark triad—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—as a consequence of which other-oriented perfectionism is now regarded as a dark form of perfectionism (Marcus & Zeigler-Hill, 2015; Stoeber, 2014). Finally, other-oriented perfectionism is a defining component of narcissistic perfectionism which is an emerging construct in perfectionism research (Nealis, Sherry, Lee-Baggley, Steward, & Macneil, 2016; Smith, Saklofske, Stoeber, & Sherry, 2016; see also Chapter 9). Hence, other-oriented perfectionism is better regarded as a separate form of perfectionism outside the two-factor model of perfectionism (Stoeber, 2014, 2015).

Perfectionistic self-presentation (Hewitt et al., 2003) is an aspect of perfectionism that goes beyond perfectionism as a personality disposition (or “trait”) by examining the motivational principles underlying perfectionism from a self-regulation perspective (Higgins, 1998).<sup>2</sup> According to Hewitt and colleagues (2003), perfectionistic self-presentation has two central aims: to promote the impression that one is perfect, and to prevent the impression that one is not. To capture these aims, Hewitt and colleagues developed a measure differentiating three aspects: perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisplay of imperfection, and nondisclosure of imperfection. Perfectionistic self-promotion is promotion-focused and driven by the need to appear perfect by impressing others, and to be viewed as perfect via displays of faultlessness and a flawless image. In contrast, nondisplay of imperfection and nondisclosure of imperfection are prevention-

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<sup>2</sup>Chapter 16 presents a brief discussion of whether perfectionism is a trait or a disposition explaining why I think that the term “dispositional perfectionism” is preferable to “trait perfectionism” (see also Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010).

focused. Nondisplay of imperfection is driven by the need to avoid appearing as imperfect. It includes the avoidance of situations where one's behavior is under scrutiny if this is likely to highlight a personal shortcoming, mistake, or flaw. In comparison, nondisclosure of imperfection is driven by a need to avoid verbally expressing or admitting to concerns, mistakes, and perceived imperfections for fear of being negatively evaluated. Studies have shown that perfectionistic self-presentation explains variance in psychological maladjustment beyond dispositional perfectionism and, perhaps more importantly, may explain *why* dispositional perfectionism is associated with psychological maladjustment (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2003; Hewitt, Habke, Lee-Baggley, Sherry, & Flett, 2008; Stoeber, Madigan, Damian, Esposito, & Lombardo, in press). Perfectionistic self-presentation—which represents the interpersonal expression of perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2003)—is clearly an important aspect of perfectionism that needs to be taken into account when regarding perfectionism and maladjustment and how perfectionism affects interpersonal relations and the therapeutic process (see Chapter 15).

Finally, there are perfectionism cognitions. Perfectionism cognitions (also called perfectionistic cognitions) are automatic perfectionistic thoughts reflecting the need to be perfect and concerns about one's inability to achieve perfection (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). Like perfectionistic self-presentation, perfectionism cognitions are an important addition to perfectionism theory and research and have explained variance in psychological maladjustment beyond dispositional perfectionism (e.g., Flett et al., 1998; Flett et al., 2012; Flett, Hewitt, Whelan, & Martin, 2007). Following Cattell and Kline (1977) in differentiating states and traits in the study of personality, perfectionism cognitions can be regarded as representing the “states” aspect of perfectionism. Further, there is evidence suggesting that—like dispositional perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation—perfectionism cognitions should be conceptualized as multidimensional differentiating perfectionistic strivings and concerns (Stoeber, Kobori, & Brown, 2014a; Stoeber, Kobori, & Tanno, 2010), but this conceptualization is still debated (Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Stoeber, Kobori, & Brown, 2014b). What is not debated is that perfectionism cognitions form an essential part of the “perfectionism puzzle” without which we cannot achieve a comprehensive understanding of perfectionism, as is detailed in Chapter 5 of this book.

### **The Psychology of Perfectionism**

Turning to the structure of the book and the individual chapters, the book is organized into four parts. Part I comprises four chapters providing different perspectives on perfectionism.

Chapter 2 (Stoeber, Damian, and Madigan) presents a motivational perspective on perfectionism examining how perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns relate to achievement motivation and self-determination. Chapter 3 (Gaudreau, Franche, Kljajic, and Martinelli) provides an account of the  $2 \times 2$  model of perfectionism as an analytic framework examining the unique, combined, and interactive effects of perfectionistic strivings (personal standards perfectionism) and perfectionistic concerns (evaluative concerns perfectionism). Chapter 4 (Stoeber, Corr, Smith, and Saklofske) examines multidimensional perfectionism from the perspective of personality theory regarding how self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism relate to key dimensions of personality. Chapter 5 (Flett, Hewitt, Nepon, and Besser) makes the “case for cognition” by taking a look at perfectionism from a cognitive perspective providing a detailed examination of, and new perspectives on, perfectionism cognitions.

Part II presents three chapters reviewing the research literature on perfectionism in special populations. Chapter 6 (Affrunti and Woodruff-Borden) examines perfectionism in children and the role that perfectionism and associated factors play in childhood anxiety disorders. Chapter 7 (Speirs Neumeister) provides a comprehensive review of research on perfectionism in gifted students examining the development, incidence, and outcomes of perfectionism in these students. Chapter 8 (A. P. Hill, Jowett, and Mallinson-Howard) examines perfectionism in sport, dance, and exercise providing an overview of recent findings in these areas and the differential effects of perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns.

Part III comprises four chapters examining the relationships that multidimensional perfectionism shows with vulnerability and resilience. Chapter 9 (Sherry, Mackinnon, and Nealis) provides an account of perfectionism and interpersonal problems, with a special focus on self-critical perfectionism and narcissistic perfectionism. Chapter 10 (Molnar, Sirois, Flett, Janssen, and Hewitt) looks at perfectionism and health presenting a comprehensive review of how perfectionism relates to, and affects, health-behaviors and stress-related processes. Continuing with the topic of stress, Chapter 11 (Dunkley) examines the relationships of perfectionism, daily stress, coping, and affect from a multilevel perspective including a case study to illustrate the relationships. Concluding Part III, Chapter 12 (Rice, Suh, and Davis) focuses on perfectionism and emotion regulation from the perspective of attachment theory, person-centered theory, and self-psychology. In addition, the chapter presents a research agenda aimed at strengthening perfectionistic resilience and lowering perfectionistic risk, thus presenting



a perfect transition to the final part of the book.

Part IV, the final part of the book, presents three chapters on the prevention and treatment of perfectionism. Chapter 13 (Wade) focuses on the prevention of perfectionism in youth examining factors that contribute to the development of perfectionism in children and adolescents and how understanding these factors may help prevent perfectionism. Chapter 14 (Egan and Shafran) provides a comprehensive overview of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for perfectionism including key CBT techniques for addressing perfectionism and a review of studies examining the effectiveness of CBT in reducing perfectionism. Chapter 15 (Hewitt, Flett, Mikail, Kealy, and Zhang) employs the perspective of the perfectionism social disconnection model as a theoretical framework for taking a look at perfectionism in the therapeutic context and how perfectionism impacts therapeutic interventions and outcomes.

The book concludes with a chapter (Chapter 16) that—following the same approach as the present chapter—provides a personal account of what I consider critical issues in perfectionism research and open questions that perfectionism research still needs to answer. In addition, the chapter suggests future directions that I hope perfectionism theory and research will take into consideration.

### **Concluding Comments**

Perfectionism is a common personality characteristic that can affect all domains of life (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). At the same time, it is a complex, multidimensional characteristic that comes in different forms and has various aspects, some of which may be harmless, benign, or even adaptive whereas others are clearly maladaptive, unhealthy, and dysfunctional (Enns & Cox, 2002; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). All this makes perfectionism a fascinating research topic, and perfectionism theory and research has become an important area of psychological inquiry. However, with scientific publications on perfectionism soaring and hundreds of journal articles being published each year (see Figure 1.1), everyone who is not an expert on perfectionism may find it difficult to keep track of the major developments and findings in perfectionism theory and research. Moreover, the last comprehensive volume presenting an overview of the psychology of perfectionism was published 15 years ago (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Since then, over 2,500 articles on perfectionism have been published (see again Figure 1.1) not only presenting new empirical findings but also new theoretical developments, conceptual frameworks, and analytic approaches as well as further additions to the canon of models and measures of perfectionism.

The present book aims to provide help and guidance in this situation by presenting

researchers, students, and practitioners with an up-to-date account of the main topics and issues of perfectionism theory and research. Written by the leading experts in the field, the chapters of the book provide a comprehensive overview of the psychology of perfectionism and the major advances that perfectionism research has made in the past 25 years. In addition, all chapters include discussions of open questions thus providing directions for future theory and research. Finally, I hope that the book provides inspirations for further psychological inquiry so we continue to make progress in our understanding of what perfectionism is, what it does, where it comes from, and—where perfectionism causes suffering and distress—how to prevent it and treat it.

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**Table 1.1***Measures of Perfectionistic Strivings and Perfectionistic Concerns*

Measure	Reference	Subscales representing indicators (“proxies”) of ...	
		Perfectionistic strivings	Perfectionistic concerns
FMPS	Frost et al. (1990)	Personal standards	Concern over mistakes
		Pure personal standards <sup>a</sup>	Concern over mistakes + doubts about actions <sup>b</sup>
HF-MPS	Hewitt and Flett (1991, 2004)	Self-oriented perfectionism <sup>c</sup>	Socially prescribed perfectionism
APS-R	Slaney et al. (2001)	High standards	Discrepancy
PI	R. W. Hill et al. (2004)	Striving for excellence	Concern over mistakes
MIPS	Stoeber et al. (2007)	Striving for perfection	Negative reactions to imperfection

*Note.* Measures are listed in chronological order of their first publication. FMPS = Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, HF-MPS = Hewitt–Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, APS-R = Almost Perfect Scale–Revised, PI = Perfectionism Inventory, MIPS = Multidimensional Inventory of Perfectionism in Sport (for examples of adaptations outside sport, see Stoeber & Rambow, 2007, and Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). Table adapted from Stoeber and Damian (2016) and Stoeber and Madigan (2016).

<sup>a</sup>See DiBartolo et al. (2004).

<sup>b</sup>See Stöber (1998).

<sup>c</sup>particularly the subscale capturing perfectionistic striving (see Stoeber & Childs, 2010)



Figure Captions

**Figure 1.1.** Number of publications in the Web of Science™ Core Collection database with “perfectionis\*” in topic (2016 = estimated). 1990/1991 are highlighted as the years when the first multidimensional conceptions of perfectionism were published (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1990, 1991).

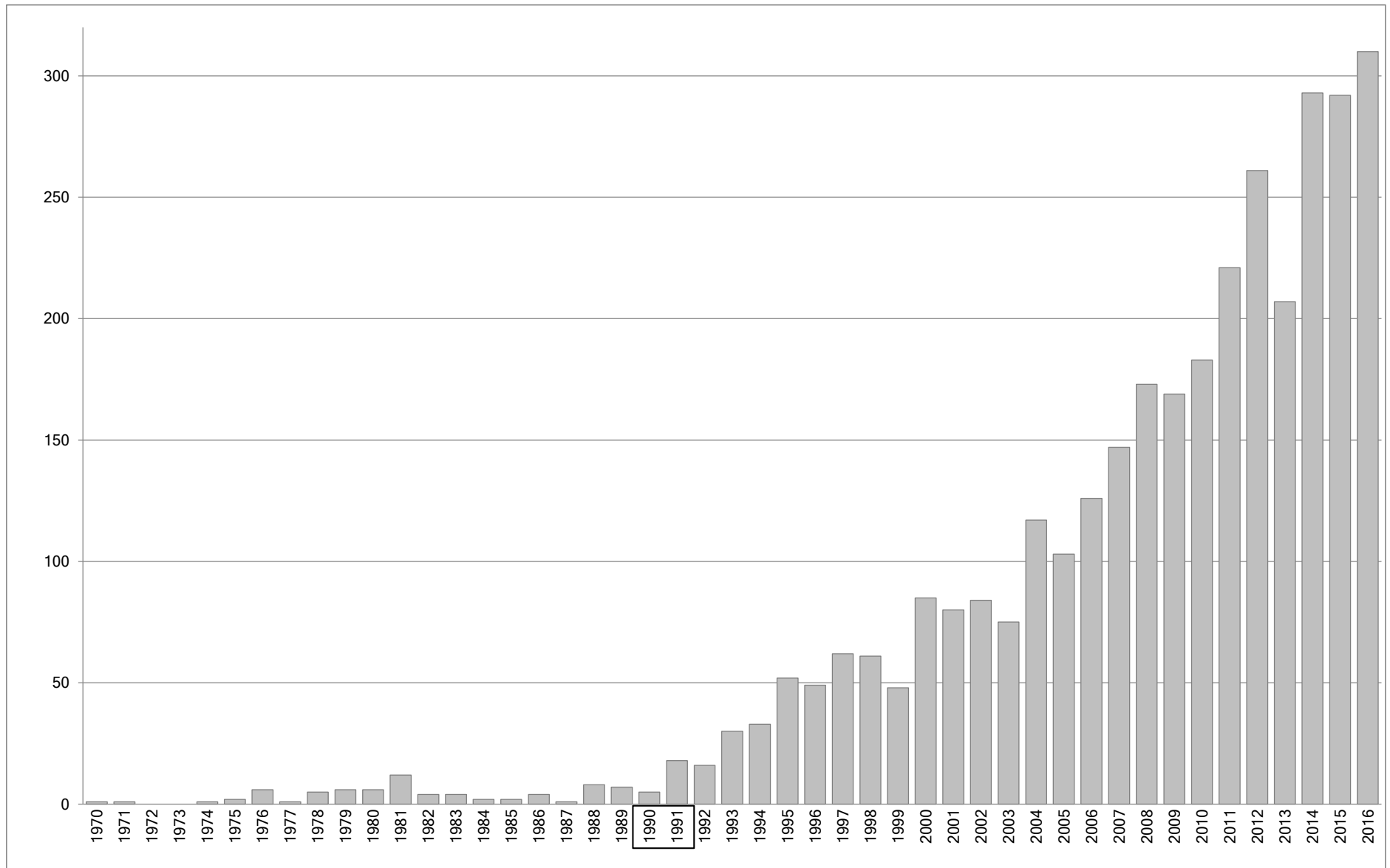


Figure 1.1