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# Development of the Maladaptive Academic Perfectionism Scale

Stephanie Steed, Sanita Ley, TC Ence, and Drew Jamieson

**ABSTRACT** *Academic maladaptive perfectionism, manifested through symptoms such as compulsive strivings and anxiety, is a common trait among college students. At present, no brief scales focus solely on perfectionist tendencies in the academic realm. The Maladaptive Academic Perfectionism Scale was designed to validly and reliably measure the emotional and behavioral domains of academic maladaptive perfectionism. One hundred Brigham Young University students completed the test. Results showed both the behavioral and emotional domains to be reliable, while only the emotional domain was valid. Once revised, this test could be used by college counselors to help identify maladaptive traits in the students they assess.*

Perfectionism, pervasive among college students, is characterized by setting extremely high academic standards (Rice & Lopez, 2004; Trull & Vieth, 1999). Research frequently divides perfectionism into two categories: adaptive and maladaptive (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Slaney & Suddarth, 2001). Although adaptive perfectionism can be beneficial in reducing stress and increasing life satisfaction, maladaptive perfectionist standards can have a negative impact on students by allowing little room for error and thus resulting in a fear of failure (Martin, 2006; Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990). This fear of failure can then lead students to feel anxious or depressed and may lead to other serious psychiatric disorders (Henning, Ey & Shaw, 1998). Thus, it is important to identify individuals prone to maladaptive perfectionism before they exhibit any negative symptoms, so that they can receive help or counseling to correct these maladaptive traits. Tests, such as the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, exist to assess maladaptive perfectionism; however, such scales are long and do not measure academic traits (Ferrari & Mautz, 1997). The purpose of this study is to create a brief scale to measure maladaptive academic perfectionism.

To create this brief scale, maladaptive perfectionism will be operationally defined by behavioral and emotional manifestations. Behavioral manifestations are characterized by setting and holding unrealistic self-standards and by having compulsive strivings. Emotional manifestations are characterized by symptoms of depression and anxiety.

An individual that exhibits behavioral manifestations of maladaptive perfectionism is prone to setting unrealistic work standards and subsequently making extreme self-evaluations. These students do not focus on personal success but instead compare themselves to others (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). An additional behavioral manifestation is shown through compulsive strivings, wherein students will consistently repeat behaviors, which are believed to help them in their quest for perfection. Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate (1990) found significant correlations between scales that measured dimensions of maladaptive perfectionism and scales that measured obsessive-compulsive behavior.

The manifestations of maladaptive perfectionism are not limited to the behavioral domain, however, and are often exhibited through emotional features such as depression and anxiety. Students with maladaptive perfectionism do not allow for error in their rigid standards and this inflexibility can lead students to feel distressed when they are unable to fulfill their self-appointed norm of perfection. This distress can then be manifested through depressive symptoms (Hewitt, Flett, & Ediger, 1996; Rice, Ashby & Slaney, 1998). Other research has found that when controlling for anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism accounted for a significant amount of variance in depression (Kawamura, Hunt, Frost & Dibartolo, 2001). Anxiety, however, is also linked to maladaptive perfectionism, and is shown to be a significant factor independent of depressive symptoms (Kawamura et al., 2001). Individuals with anxiety are overly concerned with making mistakes and view their work in concrete terms of total success or

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failure (Ferrari & Mautz, 1997; Rice & Dellwo, 2001). Because it is impossible for students to complete their class work and homework perfectly in all situations, any type of failure naturally leads maladaptive perfectionist students to feel depressed and anxious.

Research suggests that traits of maladaptive perfectionism are associated with both current and future negative psychological functioning (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 1996). This study will seek to identify these associated traits by measuring behavioral and emotional manifestations. It is hypothesized that the Maladaptive Academic Perfectionism Scale (MAPS) will reliably and validly measure maladaptive academic perfectionism in college students.

### Method

#### Participants

A convenience sample of 50 female and 50 male undergraduate students from Brigham Young University (BYU), with ages ranging from 18 to 28, completed the MAPS. Participants were recruited from student housing, undergraduate classrooms, and the university library.

#### Item Construction

Researchers used the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) method to ensure that the MAPS contained items that measured maladaptive academic perfectionism. The CVR method is commonly used to ensure that items on a test accurately represent the content that the test is purportedly measuring. In order to do this, a panel of expert judges is asked to rate test items on a set scale. The items which are rated highly are judged to be representative of a construct, and are then included on the test (Sireci, 1998). In this study, a panel of 12 undergraduate psychology student judges was briefly trained in the manifestations of maladaptive perfectionism. These judges were then asked to rank the 30 test items as being relevant to the domains of behavioral and emotional manifestations. The top 10 rated items ( $CVR \geq 0.00$ ) were selected (see Table 1). Questions were presented in a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Five of the ten items were negatively worded and reverse-scored to control for response bias.

#### Test Administration

Undergraduate students were asked to sign a consent form. They then received standardized hard copies of the MAPS and were told that it would take two to four minutes to complete. No other instructions were given.

#### Statistical Analysis

SPSS 15 was used to analyze the data. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha and Pearson bivariate correlations. Face and content validity measures were used and data reduction was completed through factor analysis. Data reduction was needed in order to condense the 30 possible MAPS items into a more succinct 10 item questionnaire. This factor analysis was also necessary to determine whether the items on the MAPS clustered into two meaningful domains of behavioral and emotional manifestations of maladaptive perfectionism.

Table 1. Items from the MAPS.

- |   |
|---|
| 1. I never think the work I do is good enough.                                  |
| 2. I constantly worry that I won't do well on assignments.                      |
| 3. I worry that others will discover that I am not as smart as they think I am. |
| 4. I feel bad about myself when I don't get the grade I wanted on a test.       |
| 5. I don't dwell on my mistakes.  |
| 6. I judge my abilities in learning by the grades I receive.                    |
| 7. I read my entire class syllabi multiple times.                               |
| 8. It is not important if I make a mistake in my school work.                   |
| 9. It does not matter if I get less than 100% on a test.                        |
| 10. I generally don't have to plan when I will get homework done in my day.     |

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients.

	Item 01	Item 02	Item 03	Item 04	Item 05	Item 06	Item 07	Item 08	Item 09	Item 10
Item 01	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Item 02	0.48**	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Item 03	0.41**	0.43**	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Item 04	0.24*	0.37**	0.24*	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-
Item 05	0.34**	0.15	0.25*	0.22*	1.00	-	-	-	-	-
Item 06	0.26*	0.30**	0.17	0.38**	0.47**	1.00	-	-	-	-
Item 07	0.27**	0.29**	-0.09	0.03	0.04	0.33**	1.00	-	-	-
Item 08	0.14	0.06	0.04	0.32**	0.24*	0.42**	0.18	1.00	-	-
Item 09	0.24*	0.20*	0.01	0.15	0.08	0.37**	0.25*	0.47**	1.00	-
Item 10	0.07	0.21*	0.04	0.23*	0.30**	0.21*	0.32**	0.25*	0.06	1.00

\* Significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\* Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## Results

To determine whether the 10 MAPS items clustered into the domains of behavioral and emotional manifestations, a principal component factor analysis was run in SPSS. This factor analysis revealed that four components accounted for a majority (68.56%) of the variance. Three of these four components consisted of items from the behavioral manifestations domain, while the other component consisted of items solely from the emotional manifestations domain. These results suggest that items in the behavioral domain were neither reliable nor valid. Items in the emotional domain, however, were reliably clustered and correlated consistently with one another.

Cronbach's alpha indicated the test's internal consistency was moderately reliable ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ). A Pearson bivariate analysis revealed that 30 of 45 correlations were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) and that 17 of 45 correlations were significant ( $p < 0.01$ ; see Table 2). These correlations suggest that a majority of the items were significantly related to one another, thus lending support to the reliability of

the measure. Three of the ten items had high content validity ( $\geq 0.83$ ), one item had marginal content validity (0.67), and six items had low content validity ( $\geq 0.00$ ). Twelve percent of participants correctly identified the construct, indicating that the test was not face valid.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to design a test that would reliably and validly measure maladaptive academic perfectionism in college students by using emotional and behavioral domains. This test was adequately reliable with high internal consistency. Although the emotional domain generally loaded onto one component, the behavioral domain was spread across three components. Thus, the results supported the validity and reliability of the emotional domain, but not the behavioral domain of the MAPS.

One limitation of this test was the MAPS' failure to capture the behavioral domain. CVR ratings for the behavioral items were consistently lower than the emotional items. Factor analysis also reflected this weakness. Items 6 and 8 loaded onto the emotional component as they may have measured the participant's feelings, instead of behavioral manifestations. In addition to this, unclear wording influenced items 7, 9, and 10 which caused these items to load onto two separate components. One further limitation of the study is the manner in which validity was demonstrated. A panel of 12 fellow undergraduate psychology students judged the content validity of the MAPS items. These students were not experts in the field of perfectionism study, and judged the validity of each questionnaire item quickly. Consequently, it is difficult to know whether the evaluation of the items was truly valid or not.

High reliability, internal consistency, and low face validity are statistical strengths of the MAPS. The high Cronbach's alpha demonstrated that a majority of the items consistently measured aspects of maladaptive perfectionism, especially in the emotional domain. Thus the emotional domain of the MAPS can be trusted as reliable in identifying characteristics of students who may be prone to maladaptive perfectionism. Internal consistency was demonstrated through the large number of signifi-

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cant correlations among items. This consistency suggests that the MAPS items are successful in repeatedly measuring traits that are consistent with maladaptive perfectionism. Low face validity was desired, because the MAPS was measuring a potentially socially undesirable trait. The achievement of low face validity suggests that students are not able to alter their answers to appear socially desirable.

The MAPS contributes to current research on perfectionism by introducing a brief measure of maladaptive perfectionism within the realm of academic experience. The MAPS is consistent with other research, which shows that maladaptive perfectionism is associated with depression and anxiety (Kawamura et al., 2001; Rice et al., 1998). In the future, it would be necessary to further define and retest the behavioral domain of maladaptive perfectionism. Once this has been achieved, convergent validity could be established by comparing it to other maladaptive perfectionism scales already in use. Once validity is established, both college counselors and students might use the MAPS to help identify and address maladaptive traits, before behavioral and emotional problems occur. In this way the MAPS may help to identify and predict students predisposed to suffer from anxiety or depression because of maladaptive perfectionist tendencies, and help college counselors teach these students how to overcome their negative habits before any psychological problems develop.

The purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that the MAPS would reliably and validly measure maladaptive academic perfectionism. The scale sought to identify both behavioral and emotional aspects, but was only able to reliably and validly measure the emotional domain. After further improvements in measuring the behavioral domain are made, the MAPS could be a useful tool in assisting college students who may suffer from maladaptive perfectionism.

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