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Socially Prescribed Perfectionism: A Threat to University Students' Success

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Abstract

Socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) can lead to increased rates of dropout among university students. Perfectionistic expectations can create chronic stress and various negative emotions, which can lead to mental health problems. In addition, students with SPP may feel a strong obligation to pursue higher education and may therefore be less intrinsically motivated to learn, placing more importance on obtaining high grades than on learning. Unfortunately, this prioritization of grades over learning may also increase the risk of cheating among these students. Procrastination of homework and avoidance of situations that can expose their imperfections to others may impact these students' performance in their schooling as well. Cognitive behavioral therapy may help students to manage the black-and-white thinking that is often associated with perfectionism. University counseling centers should be prepared to help students with SPP develop unconditional self-acceptance to mitigate its negative effects.

Many students have parents who expected them to graduate high school with a perfect GPA and an exceptionally high ACT score in order to be accepted into the top universities around the country. These high expectations from parents typically compel students to work hard throughout their high-school career and into their university experience. Many of them spend the majority of their time in college studying rather than socializing or participating in extracurricular activities because they perceive they have a lack of friendships (Hewitt et al., 2020). Although at the beginning of their university experience they may have enjoyed the classes for their major, they may begin to lose motivation for their classwork, suffer from anxiety and depression, and believe they only have worth if their GPA stays very close to a 4.0 (Smith et al., 2017a).

The students described above may be experiencing the effects of *socially prescribed perfectionism* (SPP), a type of perfectionism that is experienced when an individual believes his or her worth is measured by external achievements (Smith et al., 2018). These individuals' need to achieve perfection does not come from their own desire to be successful but rather from a fear that, if they do not succeed, their value in the eyes of others will be decreased (Smith et al., 2018). In contrast to SPP, *self-oriented perfectionism* (SOP) is a type of perfectionism that is intrinsically driven by individuals' own life ambitions and the belief that setting high standards and goals is beneficial towards personal achievement (Smith et al., 2018). These two types of perfectionism are defined in a widely accepted and studied model of perfectionism proposed by Hewitt and Flett (1991). Although other proposed models of perfectionism exist, this model has been researched extensively and will therefore be the model used in this literature review.

Perfectionism is a term that many people are familiar with, yet few seem to recognize its sometimes harmful effects. In fact, according to Stoeber and Hotham (2013), students often felt that being a perfectionist—whether socially prescribed or self-oriented—was a desirable trait to their peers. This may be because perfectionists are often believed to be the students who get the highest grades in their classes. Although this may be true in some cases, those who study

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

perfectionism view it as detrimental, especially when it is socially prescribed (Smith et al., 2017a). SOP can also have adverse effects such as added stress, but researchers generally agree that SPP leads to far more negative consequences (Stoeber et al., 2009). While all perfectionism is not inherently problematic, perfectionism can become maladaptive (Smith et al., 2017a).

The difference between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism is determined by an individual's "cognitive flexibility" (G. Allen, personal communication, November 1, 2018). According to, cognitive flexibility is an individual's ability to recognize that making a mistake does not equate to being a failure. When those with maladaptive perfectionism make a mistake in one area of their life, they tend to believe that this reflects on them as a whole, often leading them to believe that they are failures. SPP is typically regarded as a maladaptive form of perfectionism due to the rigidity of thinking in those who experience it (G. Allen, personal communication, November 1, 2018). Parents often place significant pressure on their children to maintain perfect grades, and, while having personal goals to uphold a specific GPA is not unhealthy, the need to constantly achieve a 4.0 in order to please others can lead students to experience a wide array of complications such as depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem, and loss of intrinsic motivation (Smith, et al., 2017a).

As university students deal with the added pressure of SPP during an already stressful experience of attending university, they will likely need additional support to help manage and combat its negative effects. This support should be readily available to students on campus and could be provided by academic counselors as well as faculty in the university's counseling center. While it may not be possible to eliminate the pressure of external expectations on students, therapists in a university's counseling center can provide tools and skills to help students learn unconditional self-acceptance regardless of their perceived failure, and by extension, reduce the detrimental effects of SPP, including increased rates of dropout (Lloyd et al., 2015). Although many high-achieving college students proudly self-identify as 'perfectionists' and may appear to excel academically due to these perfectionistic tendencies, universities should offer counseling and

support services for students who experience SPP to prevent higher risk of dropout among this population. Those in this category often exhibit poorer mental health than their non-perfectionistic peers, experience less intrinsic motivation surrounding their studies, and have a tendency toward procrastination and avoidant behaviors in a deadline-driven, collegiate environment (Smith et al., 2017a; Smith et al., 2017b; Stoeber et al., 2009; Arazzini & De George-Walker, 2014).

Poor Mental Health

Although exciting and enlightening for many, the collegiate experience places an inordinate amount of stress on students (Ong & Cheong, 2009). Many students are living on their own for the first time in their lives, are in an unfamiliar city, must form a new cohort of friends, and are adjusting to the academic rigor of university life. This leaves certain students vulnerable to experiencing a variety of mental-health challenges (Smith et al., 2018). University students in general are at an increased risk for mental illness; in fact, Pedrelli et al. (2015) stated that 30% of all university students experience anxiety or depression (not including other mental health disturbances). In addition, Gonzalez et al. (2010) reported that university students experience depressive symptoms at rates three times higher than the general population (Gonzalez et al., 2010 as cited in Smith et al., 2018). A report generated in 2017 by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health showed that an increasing number of university students have seriously considered suicide in the last year (see Appendix). These statistics provide insight on the prevalence of mental illness in university students.

While mental disorders are already common among university students, those who experience SPP are at an even higher risk for experiencing mental health issues. Maladaptive perfectionism is certainly not the only factor that can lead to increased risk of developing mental health challenges, but the two are often shown to be positively correlated (Smith et al., 2017a). It is no surprise, then, that as the prevalence of depression in university students has increased over the years, that rates of perfectionism have also increased (Smith et al., 2018). This suggests that there may be a stronger correlation

between the two variables than previously believed, and many researchers are still trying to understand the relationship between perfectionism and depression. Smith et al. (2018) found that SPP can contribute to hopelessness regarding future interpersonal relations, because individuals tend to feel they are not living up to the standards set for them by others, despite evidence to the contrary. This hopelessness can lead to isolation, exacerbating the individual's depressive symptoms (Smith et al., 2018). Malinowski et al. (2017) also found that individuals experiencing SPP were more likely to have difficulty accepting mistakes and moving on from them. This rumination on past faults created stress and worsened depression in individuals. Thus, it may be important for those who suffer with SPP to work through past mistakes that continue to cause distress with the support of a therapist, in order to correct distorted perceptions of oneself.

The levels of stress college students experience typically increases as the academic semester progresses, especially while they are working towards the high-pressure week of finals that is required by most universities. According to Milyayskaya et al. (2014), the progression of the semester is also accompanied by a clear decline of positive affect in students, especially in those who experience SPP. Students with maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies not only have the external pressures of meeting deadlines and remembering material for tests but also have the internal pressure of expecting themselves to perform perfectly, often experiencing a large amount of fear surrounding the possibility of making errors (Smith et al., 2017a; Flett et al., 2016). Flett et al. (2016) asserted that these expectations and fears can lead to severe chronic stress; thus, individuals with SPP may be more likely to develop a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety. In addition, Smith et al. (2018) stated that perfectionistic concerns were accompanied by a wide range of negative emotions, which can contribute to worsened mental health. Although stress is an unavoidable aspect of a university experience for many students, those who struggle with SPP tend to be more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress on their mental health.

Less Intrinsic Motivation

Many students enter university with excitement for the opportunity to learn about a subject they are passionate about, and this passion can inspire them to work hard and be successful in their studies. However, students who experience SPP often lack intrinsic motivation (Stoeber et al., 2009). Intrinsic motivation is cultivated from an individual's desire to improve and is often positively correlated with a love of learning and the recognition that challenges are opportunities for growth (Pintrich et al., 1991). SPP is often characterized by an individual's need to please others, so unlike those who are motivated by their intrinsic desire, students experiencing SPP are typically extrinsically motivated to receive an undergraduate education (Stoeber et al., 2009). External motivators for these students may include parental expectations to attend university, the need or want to earn a larger salary, and the perceived pressure of seeing many of their peers enrolling in university.

Although wanting to receive a degree for these reasons is not inherently negative, it may put certain students at risk for obtaining lower-than-average grades. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) found that intrinsically motivated students experienced more interest in the subject matter they were studying, regardless of the topic. Furthermore, Deci and Ryan (2000) formulated the *cognitive evaluation theory*. This theory proposes that feelings of competency and receiving positive feedback when challenged can increase an individual's intrinsic motivation. However, further studies found that this perceived efficacy only intensifies internal motivation when the individual feels that their participation in the challenge was freely chosen (Fisher, 1978; Ryan, 1982 as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, individuals who feel obligated to receive an education may actually experience a decrease in motivation, rather than an increase.

An inherent part of learning in a university setting is receiving grades based on a student's level of performance. While maintaining a certain GPA is often a requirement and not necessarily harmful, students experiencing SPP may prioritize receiving a perfect GPA over the experience of learning (Mills & Blankstein, 2000). In fact, students who are extremely extrinsically motivated by grades and less

Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

intrinsically motivated to learn are more likely to resort to cheating or plagiarism in order to maintain their GPA (Jordan, 2001). Jordan (2001) reported that the students who cheated did not necessarily cheat in every course; rather, they cheated in the courses for which they lacked intrinsic motivation. Although not every student who places excessive emphasis on grades will cheat, this study illustrates that having an intrinsic desire of receiving a higher education may be important in preventing students from dishonest academic behavior and in predicting the true level of comprehension a student gains from their schooling.

Procrastination and Avoidance Behaviors

Not only can perfectionism decrease a students' intrinsic motivation, but it has also been widely studied as a factor influencing the likelihood of procrastination (Smith et al., 2017b). Often, perfectionists experience "discrepancies," or the tendency to believe that who they are does not meet their standards of who they would like to be (Smith et al., 2017b, p. 117). Smith et al. (2017b) found that those with SPP had larger discrepancies than those with SOP, and the larger discrepancy a person experienced, the higher their likelihood of procrastination. This may be because those large discrepancies convince individuals that no matter what they do, their performance will never meet their expectations or the expectations of others. This hopelessness regarding their abilities typically leads individuals with SPP to procrastinate as long as possible in order to avoid their seemingly inevitable failure and consequent negative perceptions from others (Smith et al., 2017b). While procrastination may be employed in order to delay or avoid a failure, it often is the very thing that leads individuals to perform lower than they would be capable of otherwise.

While many procrastinate out of avoidance, some individuals may procrastinate in order to self-handicap. Self-handicapping is defined by the American Psychological Association (2018) as "a strategy of creating obstacles to one's performance, so that future anticipated failure can be blamed on the obstacle rather than on one's lack of

ability. If one succeeds despite the handicap, it brings extra credit or glory to the self” (para. 1). Arazzini and De George-Walker (2014) found that perfectionistic individuals had a lower sense of self-efficacy and that this lowered self-efficacy predicted increased self-handicapping behaviors. Procrastination can be one technique of self-handicapping, but other techniques could include missing necessary classes, producing low-quality work despite the individual’s ability, and neglecting to complete homework entirely. It was also found that SPP was significantly negatively correlated with the amount of effort and time spent on academic work (Mills & Blankstein, 2000). According to Feick and Rhodewalt (1997), self-handicapping was often used to maintain an outward pretense of flawlessness as well as to protect the perfectionist individual’s self-esteem from damage resulting from a perceived failure. Socially prescribed perfectionists may therefore be at an increased risk for self-handicapping, not only due to their reduced self-efficacy, but also because one of their greatest concerns is to preserve outsiders’ perceptions of their perfection.

Self-handicapping is not the only technique used to maintain an individual’s façade of perfection. According to Hewitt et al. (2003), perfectionists engage in various different behaviors in order to manage how others view them. Two of these behaviors are “nondisplay of imperfection (i.e., concealing and avoiding behavioral demonstrations of one’s imperfection), and nondisclosure of imperfection (i.e., evading and avoiding verbal admissions of one’s imperfection)” (p. 1303). Unfortunately, students may evade class presentations, participating in class discussions, and even working in groups in order to keep others from seeing any imperfections, and may go so far as to avoid enrolling in small classes where their flaws are more likely to be noticed by their peers and professors. Mills and Blankstein (2000) found that socially prescribed perfectionists were less likely, when struggling, to seek help from professors, teaching assistants, and other resources in order to avoid admitting to their flaws. Students with SPP may also avoid many different campus resources, such as academic advisors, tutors, and even at times therapists to avoid admitting their challenges. Avoiding help when

struggling highlights the paradox that SPP students face: Although they desire others to see their perfection, they are less likely to take the necessary steps in order to actually maintain a perfect GPA.

Discussion

Maladaptive SPP has become increasingly common among university students (Smith et al., 2018). SPP places additional stress on students as they work towards graduation and can have various negative consequences. These effects, when combined, can lead to poor grades and may eventually result in students dropping out of college. The increased pressure when individuals expect perfection from oneself can lead to worsened mental health, which typically continues to worsen throughout the semester as stress increases (Milyayskaya et al., 2014). Students with SPP also derive motivation for attending and excelling in school from external factors rather than from intrinsic desire (Stoerber et al., 2009). In addition, SPP can lead students to procrastinate homework and avoid help-seeking.

As students experiencing SPP reach out to the university counseling center (most likely due to mental health concerns or difficulties with motivation or procrastination rather than SPP itself), counselors should take into account the prevalence of SPP in the university demographic and should be prepared to encounter many students dealing with its effects. Although it may not be immediately clear why these students are struggling, being aware of the effects of SPP may help identify those students experiencing it. Because of perfectionists' tendency to avoid admitting any mistakes they have made (Hewitt et al., 2003), it may be difficult at first for therapists to begin helping students with SPP. But as therapists build rapport with these students, it is likely that the student will begin sharing more as they learn the therapist will not develop a negative image of them despite their flaws.

There is no single prescribed way for therapists to help their clients manage perfectionism, but Allen (personal communication, November 1, 2018) suggested that cognitive behavioral therapy and humanistic therapy techniques may be two of the most effective ways to combat SPP and assist individuals in learning to set goals

for their own benefit and growth. Perhaps the most important skill for a student experiencing SPP to develop is unconditional self-acceptance (Allen, personal communication, November 1, 2018). This, when coupled with cognitive behavioral techniques, can help perfectionistic students develop the cognitive flexibility that is essential for transforming maladaptive perfectionism into adaptive perfectionism (Allen, personal communication, November 1, 2018). Allen also emphasized having compassion for oneself as the best way to manage the poor self-esteem and mental-health problems that can accompany perfectionism, as those with SPP tend to be extremely critical of themselves (personal communication, November 1, 2018). Because the thought and behavior patterns of SPP are often long-standing, it may take an extended period of time to reverse an individual's perfectionistic tendencies. Although this can be discouraging, developing healthier thought patterns can allow individuals experiencing SPP to live fuller lives free from its effects. This will likely reduce the number of students who struggle academically and who ultimately discontinue their higher education because of SPP.

Although many believe that perfectionism is not harmful, research has consistently shown the opposite to be true (Allen, personal communication, November 1, 2018). Especially in extremely competitive and stressful collegiate environments, university counseling centers should be prepared to help students manage their perfectionistic tendencies to prevent the deterioration of the students mental health, increase their intrinsic motivation, and manage procrastination and avoidant behaviors. In addition, counselors should help their student clients work towards creating new habits that allow for self-compassion and developing an understanding that making mistakes does not mean they are failures.

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Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

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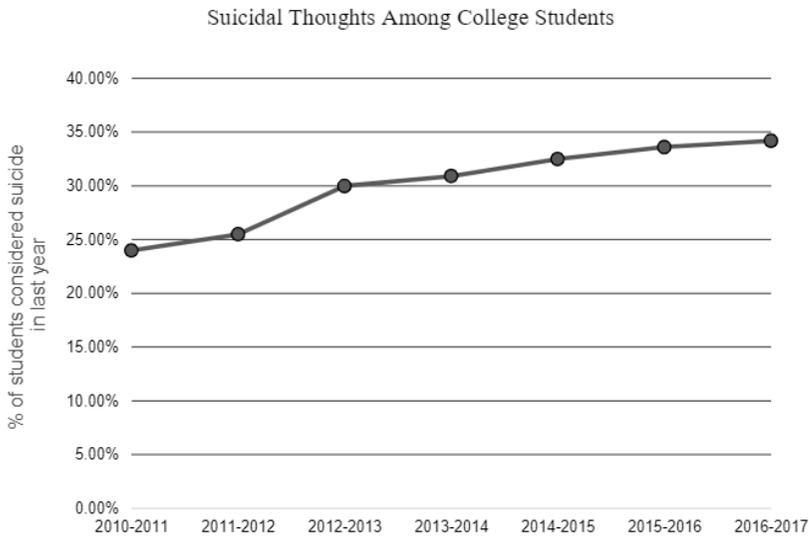
Appendix

Figure 1. Graphical representation of the increase in the number of university students who have seriously considered suicide in the last year. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health collected data from the “Mental Health History” section of the Standardized Data Set (SDS) from varying numbers of participating university counseling centers across the country. The answers were then simplified to “yes” or “no” in order to provide a more accurate yearly prevalence rate. Adapted from “2017 Annual Report,” by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, November 20, 2018, retrieved from https://ccmh.psu.edu/files/2018/02/2017_CCMH_Report-1r4m88x.pdf