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Perfectionist professors have lower research productivity

Adverse trait could seriously affect a professor's career, new **study finds.**

by *Léo Charbonneau*

Perfectionism is sometimes viewed as a positive personality trait to be rewarded or reinforced, but Dalhousie University psychology professor Simon Sherry believes it is mostly a self-defeating behaviour.

In professors, the effect can be particularly pernicious: in a new study, Dr. Sherry and colleagues found that perfectionism leads to lower research productivity. The findings suggest that professors who display a higher level of perfectionism are less likely to produce publications, garner citations or publish their research in high-impact journals.

"We found that perfectionism trips up professors on the way to research productivity. The more perfectionistic the professor, the less productive they are," said Dr. Sherry. This could "seriously and adversely impact" their career development. The study was published in the [October 2010 issue of the Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science](#).

Dr. Sherry said he and his colleagues decided to look into this issue because of the continuing debate over whether perfectionism is adaptive, meaning beneficial, or maladaptive. To date, the debate has been "largely conjectural," he said.

There are various measures of perfectionism, but most revolve around a few key definitions. "Perfectionists tend to do things perfectly – or not at all," said Dr. Sherry. "They cannot relax until a task is 'perfect.' And they strive for perfection in whatever they do, requiring nothing less than perfection of themselves at all times."

Perfectionists may also harbour crippling doubts about their abilities, which can lead to "a lot of repetitive and fruitless checking, and an exaggerated and extreme reaction to mistakes."

These personality traits should not be confused with conscientiousness, said Dr. Sherry. "Certainly, I recognize value in achievement-striving and being goal-directed and organized and disciplined. But perfectionism is different."

To investigate the issue, he and colleagues Paul Hewitt of the University of British Columbia and Gordon Flett of York University studied the link between

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perfectionism and research productivity among psychology professors working at universities in the U.S. and Canada. They limited it to their own profession to simplify the logistics and restricted it to universities with graduate programs in psychology.

They contacted 10,000 professors, of whom 1,258 responded using an online survey. The researchers found a “robust correlation” between increased perfectionism and decreased research productivity in the respondents. A higher level of perfectionism was associated with a lower number of total publications and a lower number of first-authored publications. It was also associated with a lower number of citations and a track record of publishing in journals with a lower impact rating.

“So, across several indices of quantity and quality, it looks like perfectionism – in our sample of psychology professors, at least – impedes research productivity,” said Dr. Sherry. He can't say for certain if the findings can be generalized to other disciplines, but he suspects they could. “Perfectionism is sort of the common cold of academia. Examples abound, both good, bad and otherwise.”

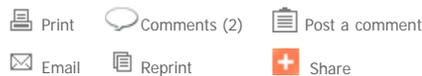
If professors suspect they're perfectionists, Dr. Sherry counsels that they seek professional help. The best treatment options appear to be interpersonal or cognitive behavioural therapy, he added.

Ironically, “perfectionists are often very reluctant to seek help because they see it as tantamount to being imperfect,” he said. As well, perfectionism itself can be a barrier to effective treatment; afflicted individuals might subconsciously sabotage their course of treatment because of unrealistic expectations.

Perfectionist profs have another reason to worry: research has linked perfectionism with depression, suicide and various forms of eating disorders such as bulimia, binge eating and anorexia.

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It's an interesting, but not surprising finding...this is in line with earlier findings by Boice's in this area as well.

Unfortunately, the MSP plan in my province doesn't cover the care to solve the problem.

Posted by Jojo, Feb 22, 2011 7:45 PM

Thanks to professor Simon Sherry, Dalhousie University psychology, for his resourceful and nice study.

I like it very much.

Posted by Absar, Feb 21, 2011 2:11 AM

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