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Helping or hindering?

By [Amanda Pelham](#) - November 9, 2010

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Simon Sherry trains his eye on fellow psychology professors and their perfectionist tendencies. *(Photo illustration by Danny Abriel)*

'Obsessing much?' 'Just back away.' 'Let it go.'

This sort of comment from perceptive colleagues or friends may indicate perfectionistic tendencies, but in general the recipient isn't likely to recognize their trait as a problem.

Even if someone wryly acknowledges himself as a perfectionist, there's a widely held -- if mistaken -- belief that perfectionism is an unambiguously positive trait.

But when a researcher decided to turn the lens on fellow professors, the findings proved to be the opposite of conventional wisdom. Assistant Professor Simon Sherry studied psychology professors working in universities throughout North America, evaluating them on a continuum of perfectionistic traits and correlating this with their research productivity.

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Give Feedback

"Perfectionism may represent a form of counterproductive over-striving that limits research productivity among psychology professors," says Dr. Sherry.

By studying a large sample of 1,258 psychology professors, perfectionism was found to be negatively related to the number of total publications, the number of first-authored publications, the number of citations, and the impact rating of the publishing journal.

Whether perfectionism helps or hinders success is a question that preoccupies researchers in this field. There is no more contentious issue in the perfectionism research, a literature involving several thousand research articles.

Good or good enough?

"I believe our recent study provides one provocative answer to this question," he says.

The study is in press now with the *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*. The collaborative team included graduate students and collaborators at Dalhousie, York University and the University of British Columbia.

Why the navel gazing, so to speak?

Psychology professors were chosen as a study example because their occupation is multi-faceted and complex. They are required to be flexible and strategic, the exact qualities that perfectionism may inhibit. It is important to distinguish between being conscientious and being a perfectionist. Conscientiousness is defined as self-discipline, goal orientation and a focus on results; versus perfectionism, which is a relentless, rigid striving for unrealistic goals.

"You need to know when it is adaptive to pursue extremely high goals and when it is okay to just be good enough," says Dr. Sherry. "Perfectionism is excessive -- the person has a compulsive need to be perfect, however in reality this rarely translates into high performance."

It's interesting to ask what might trip the perfectionist up in the pursuit of perfection. Perfectionists need approval and they fear evaluation, so criticism will prompt a strong reaction.

"And yet, as a professor, you face daily scrutiny, from students, peers and reviewers," he notes. "In order to succeed, you need to take risks, compete for grants and experience setbacks."

If a professor who is a perfectionist receives a critical evaluation of an article or is unsuccessful in a grant application, he or she can lose a week (or more) of productive time to harsh self-recrimination. This leads to further immobilization in the face of enormous pressure. The academic literature has established that people high in perfectionism encounter more stress, health concerns, mental health issues and negative life events.

"It's quite a package all together and the end result is less productivity," he says. "The individual can't seem to regulate themselves -- it's obsessive and it's ugly."

Next study

Clinical psychologists are often challenged by a patient's often mistaken attribution of their success to perfectionism. In such a case, changes suggested by a therapist are perceived as a threat to continuing success. These new findings will help clinical psychologists during discussions with patients.

"Over the past 15 years, new treatments have emerged. Clearly, there's a long way to go, but increasingly there are promising interventions to help perfectionistic individuals," says Dr.

Sherry.

The next phase of his investigation will focus on asking why there is an association between perfectionism and depression.

"My belief is that people with a high degree of perfectionism struggle to relate to others satisfactorily and this inability contributes to conflict and alienation," he says.

In the next study, volunteers will be asked to wear recorders on their belts all day. The recorders will switch on every 12 minutes to record the ambient environment. Later on, researchers will assess these 'overheard' social interactions to test the idea that perfectionism contributes to tangled and limiting relationships which, in turn, contribute to depression.

"A person with a high degree of perfectionism is always going to be vulnerable," he says. "Perfectionism isn't bad, as long as everything remains perfect."

Readers Say

SD

November 9, 2010 11:32 AM

I learned about perfectionism in hindsight and the hard way My graduate school supervisor was a perfectionist unbeknownst to me when I asked him to supervise me. He certainly brought out the best in his students, however, the downside arose when it came time to publish. The papers for publication were never "good enough" to submit and to this day remain unpublished. In my hindsight, his publication track record should have alerted me to the downfall of his perfectionist ways. His publications were few and he subsequently moved from institution to institution trying to establish his research.

Although I did interview him as a potential supervisor, his perfectionist attitude at the time seemed like a good thing. However, my publication record was impacted and because of the few publications, future jobs may be as well. Hindsight is a wonderful gift!

tanya Gevaert

November 9, 2010 5:00 PM

"perfectionism was found to be negatively related to the number of total publications, the number of first-authored publications, the number of citations, and the impact rating of the publishing journal"

Ah, perfectionism and its nasty sibling procrastination. If a project is left until the last moment, and it is not "perfect", well, no wonder!

"Perfectionists need approval and they fear evaluation, so criticism will prompt a strong reaction."

And so the perfectionist procrastinates, submits work that 'could have been better', is evaluated harshly, and then engages in negative thinking.

"The next phase of his investigation will focus on asking why there is an association between perfectionism and depression."

How about studying the fear of failure, fear of success, and fear of shame: the "trifecta of fear" that often leads to depression and low productivity!

DML

November 14, 2010 11:12 AM

Confessions of a recovering perfectionist

As someone raised in a very strict environment, I was raised with the motto: "If it isn't

flawless; it isn't finished," and I tortured myself with that belief for three decades. All negative feedback & criticisms were taken as personal assaults on my character and my intelligence; and in short, made me feel sub-par in my endeavors.

I have now come to realize that perfection is a myth- and its pursuit is a very good way to create unnecessary mental anguish by chewing up valuable time obsessing over *every single* minor detail. I have since come to my senses, and rather than strive for perfection, I now strive for *competence* in my endeavors; and I now welcome [honest!] feedback and criticism. I now see feedback as a chance to learn & grow; and a chance to learn the viewpoint of others.

There is much satisfaction to be had in enjoying your skills and competencies rather than constantly focusing on your deficiencies. Since I have rejected perfectionism, I have become a more flexible thinker, a much quicker & better problem-solver, and much more efficient and productive in my tasks [much to my surprise].

Perfectionism should be acknowledged as the unreasonably obsessive form of negative self-talk that it is. Too many good people are made to feel bad about themselves due to perfectionism's unattainable goals.

Patti Doyle-bedwell

November 14, 2010 10:17 PM

I try to let go of perfectionism as it has hindered me since I was a child. If I didn't get all A's, I was stupid. This has hindered me even as an adult who is over the hill so to speak. Self-judgement, and negative stereotypes have led to lack of motivation. I certainly understand the endless cycle that can end up in depression. I have learned that perfection is impossible. I can only do the best I can, and it may end up somewhere in the middle. Not the world's best, and not the worst in history but maybe somewhere in the middle. And it's okay. I do the best I can, and let it go.

As I read this over to make sure there are no mistakes!

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