

Is your perfectionism limiting your research productivity?

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Perfectionism is a double-edged sword. For some people, at some point, and in some way, perfectionism may be adaptive, especially in situations where perfection is clearly defined and potentially obtainable (e.g., a 10 out of 10 score on a multiple choice quiz in psychology 101). However, when it comes to being a psychology professor and to disseminating your research, perfectionism is likely to leave you not on the cutting edge—but on the bleeding edge—of that sword.

Whereas self-discipline, organization, and achievement striving encourage success among psychology professors, perfectionism is something different. Perfectionism involves rigidly and relentlessly demanding perfection of yourself. There is a compulsive need to be perfect. Perfectionists tend to do things perfectly—or not at all. 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.

Although some researchers suggest perfectionism is an adaptive form of achievement striving, I believe perfectionism is a counter-productive form of compulsive over-striving that limits research productivity (e.g., number of first-authored publications). Perfectionism is tied to problems that hinder task completion such as procrastination, writer’s block, and public speaking anxiety. Moreover, perfectionism may impede research productivity by generating conflictual, unsatisfying working relationships where colleagues are treated more as competitors than as collaborators. A paralyzing fear of failure and mistakes, a crippling preoccupation with others’ opinions and evaluations, nagging self-doubts about performance abilities, and an exaggerated sensitivity to rejection also tend to accompany perfectionism. In a profession where opportunities for failure, evaluation, and rejection abound, perfectionism can paralyze a psychology professor.

While the costs and the benefits of perfectionism in academia are hotly debated, this debate is largely conjectural. To begin addressing this shortcoming, we studied the link between perfectionism and research productivity in 1,258 professors belonging to North American graduate programs in psychology. This study was published in *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* (see S. B. Sherry, Hewitt, D. L., Sherry, Flett, & Graham, in press). We found a robust correlation between increased perfectionism and decreased research productivity in psychology professors. More specifically, a higher level of perfectionism was associated with a lower number of total publications and a lower number

of first-authored publications. Total and first-authored publications were measured in terms of books, edited books, refereed journal articles, and book chapters. A higher level of perfectionism was also associated with a lower number of citations and a track record of publishing in journals with a lower impact rating. In sum, our findings suggest psychology professors with a higher level of perfectionism are less likely to produce publications, garner citations, or publish their research in high-impact journals. Such decrements in research productivity may seriously and adversely impact a professor’s career development amid the publish-or-perish field of academic psychology.

Considered in relation to the larger research literature on perfectionism, it appears perfectionism may compromise not only your research productivity but also your overall well-being. Stress, hassles, conflict, anger, depression, anxiety, and suicide are all related to perfectionism. And perfectionists appear particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes (e.g., depression) in the face of perceived achievement failures (e.g., not getting a grant, receiving poor teacher ratings, being denied a promotion, or having a publication rejected). As “perfection” is hard to define, harder to obtain, impossible to maintain, and arguably non-existent, ceaselessly demanding perfection of yourself also predisposes chronic dissatisfaction with your research and with your career. How do you know when a grant, book, or manuscript is “perfect”?

Overall then, perfectionistic psychology professors appear prone to a negative pattern where compulsive over-striving contributes to decreased productivity and to increased distress. Not unlike a dog chasing its tail, perfectionistic psychology professors are caught in a vicious cycle: exerting tremendous effort in pursuit of a questionable goal, spinning round and round, never truly achieving a satisfying outcome, until inevitably giving up or falling down.

References

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