Perfectionism and self concept among primary school children in Egypt

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Abstract

**Introduction.** The main purpose of this study is to explore the correlation between dimensions of perfectionism and self-concepts among school aged students in Egypt.

**Method.** Two hundred – eighty four children (fifth and sixth graders) participated in this study. The mean age of the participants was 144.37 months, SD 6.36. Pearson correlation coefficients among dimensions of perfectionism and dimensions of self-concept were employed for data analysis.

**Results.** Results indicated that Self-oriented perfectionism significantly correlated with Academic self-concept and General self-worth in a positive direction. The correlation between Self-oriented perfectionism and Non-academic self-concept was not significant. There were also significant positive correlations between Compulsiveness and all self-concept subscales. Contrary to expectations, Socially-prescribed perfectionism was positively correlated with Academic self-concept.

**Discussion and Conclusion.** For the 284 school-aged children in this study, most perfectionism and self-concept dimensions were positively correlated with each other. “Self-oriented perfectionism” was associated with an enhanced General self-worth and increased Academic self-concept in mathematics, reading and general school. Contrary to expectations, “Socially-prescribed perfectionism” and “Sensitivity to mistakes” were also significantly positively associated with Academic self-concept, although not with Non-academic self-concept or General self-worth.

**Keywords:** Perfectionism, self concept, primary school children, Egypt.

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Perfeccionismo y auto-concepto en alumnos de primaria en Egipto

Resumen

Introducción. El propósito principal de este estudio es explorar la correlación entre las dimensiones del perfeccionismo y del autoconcepto en el alumnado de primaria de Egipto.

Método. Doscientos ochenta y cuatro niños (de 5º y 6º curso) participaron en el estudio. La media de edad de los participantes fue de 144.37 meses con una desviación típica de 6.36. Para el análisis de datos se utilizaron los coeficientes de correlación de Pearson entre las dimensiones de perfeccionismo y autoconcepto.

Resultados. Los resultados indicaron que el perfeccionismo auto-orientado correlaciona significativamente con el autoconcepto académico y con la infravaloración personal en sentido positivo. La correlación entre perfeccionismo auto-orientado y autoconcepto no académico no fue significativa. También se encuentran correlaciones positivas entre la compulsibilidad y las subescalas de autoconcepto. En contra de lo esperado, el perfeccionismo social correlacionó positivamente con el autoconcepto académico.

Discusión y Conclusiones. Para los 284 alumnos participantes en el estudio la mayoría de las dimensiones del perfeccionismo y del autoconcepto correlacionaban positivamente entre ellas. El “perfeccionismo auto-orientado” se asociaba con la infravaloración personal y con el autoconcepto en matemáticas, lectura y otras actividades académicas. En contra de lo esperado, el “perfeccionismo social” y la “sensibilidad a los errores” presentaron correlaciones positivas con el autoconcepto académico, aunque no con el autoconcepto no académico y con la infravaloración personal.

Palabras clave: Perfeccionismo, autoconcepto, educación primaria, Egipto.

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Introduction

“Perfectionism”, as a personality construct, has been conceptualised as “the striving for flawlessness” (Flett & Hewitt, 2002), and “setting high personal standards” is identified as one of the core features of perfectionism (Accordino, Accordino & Slaney, 2000). In the pursuit of perfectionism, individuals often display some characteristic behavioural tendencies. Such characteristics include having a low tolerance for mistakes, having a preference for order and organization (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990), and a strong need for admiration (Rice & Preusser, 2002).

Traditionally, perfectionism is conceived as uni-dimensional and negative, based on its association with psychopathology such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders (Blatt, 1995; Lundh, 2004). This conceptualisation is usually represented by the psychoanalytic tradition or cognitive behavioural therapy group.

They treated “perfectionism” either as a result of a harsh superego (e.g., Horney, 1937) or as cognitive distortions that should be disputed (e.g., Burns, 1980). Contemporary studies on perfectionism have conceptualized it as multidimensional, having both adaptive and maladaptive components. For instance, setting high personal standard and organization skills could be functional for personal achievement, whereas excessive concern about making mistakes, and self-criticism could be maladaptive (Rice & Preusser, 2002).

To date most empirical studies on perfectionism were conducted with adults (Frost et al., 1990; Preusser, et al., 1994; Chang 2000). The investigation of perfectionism in children is a new endeavour (Hewitt, et al., 2002; Flett et al., 2002; Rice, et al., 2004). Many of the existing studies used instruments developed for adults (e.g., Einstein et al., 2000). Hence, the study of children’s perfectionism, by using age-appropriate instrument, is vitally important.

Self-Concept

“Self-concept” can be regarded as an individual’s self-perceptions, which consists of sets of personal attributes, behavioural characteristics and competence. These self-attributes have both a descriptive and an evaluative nature (Piers & Harris, 1969; Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976). They are formed and modified by life experience and reinforcement based on
internal evaluations by the individual and feedback from external evaluations by significant others (Marsh, 1988; Marsh & Ayotte, 2003).

Self-concept is also a multidimensional construct. Marsh and Ayotte (2003) reported that early primary children could differentiate the diverse facets of maths, reading, music and sport self-concepts, and their perceptions are not uniform. For instance, a child could simultaneously have a positive music self concept and a poor sport self concept. Hence, it would be more meaningful to consider each dimension of self concept separately rather than globally. Studies using a global self-concept often fail to detect differences as a result of the counterbalancing effects within specific dimensions of self-concept (Guerin, Marsh, & Famose, 2003).

It follows that the internalisation of perfectionist standards would have differential impacts on children’s academic self-efficacy, confidence about one’s physical appearance and physical abilities, and social relationships. An instrument that taps into the different dimensions of self-concept is needed to delineate the effects of perfectionism on different aspects of self-concept.

Relationship between perfectionism and self-concept It has been suggested that perfectionists tend to base their self-worth on their performance (Barrow & Moore, 1983; Burns, 1980). When there is a match between their perfectionistic personal standards and their actual performance, they have an enhanced self-concept. Conversely, when there is a discrepancy between actual performance and self-imposed high standards, they have a poor self-concept.

Studies investigating the relationship between perfectionism and self-concept in adults produced mixed findings. Flett and colleagues (2003), for example, found that both Self-oriented and Socially-prescribed perfectionism were negatively associated with unconditional self-acceptance. Similarly, other studies also found a significant negative association between high Concern about mistakes and self-esteem (Rice, et al., 1998; Campbell & Di Paula, 2002).

On the other hand, significant positive associations between adaptive dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., high Personal standards and Organisation) and self-esteem have also been reported (Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze, & Rice, 2004). Given that studies with adults have shown that evaluation of personal performance against an internalized standard by perfection-
ists has an impact on their self-concept and self-esteem, one could wonder if the same relationship applies to children. Investigation of the relationship between perfectionism and self-concept in children and adolescents has been a neglected area, as demonstrated by a paucity of studies and a tendency to focus on the academically gifted (Dixon, Lapsley & Hanchon, 2004; Parker, 1997). Studies with adolescents and academically talented children have variously found that arguably adaptive aspects of perfectionism such as high Personal standards and Organisation, low Concern over mistakes, low Parental criticism and low Discrepancy between standards and attainments, were associated with positive self-esteem, academic self-concept, GPA, achievement motivation and parent relations (Dixon et al., 2004; Parker, 1997).

Conversely, high levels of Socially-prescribed perfectionism, Concern over mistakes, Parental criticism and expectations, and Discrepancy have been shown to be maladaptive by being associated with low self-esteem (Accordino, Accordino & Slaney, 2000; Dixon, et al., 2004; Parker, 1997). In this context, Rice and colleagues (2004) investigated perfectionism scores on Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale (AMPS) with scores on the multidimensional Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1969). As in previous studies, high Sensitivity to mistakes was associated with low self-concept for children.

So the present study seeks to explore the correlation between dimensions of perfectionism and self-concepts among school aged students in Egypt.

**Method**

**Participants**

Two hundred – eighty four fifth- and six – graders participated in this study. The mean age of the participants was 144.37 months (SD 6.36). Parental consent was obtained for each participant prior to the administration of the questionnaires. Items from the four questionnaires were read aloud to the students by the researcher in class. Students were required to write down their response. The order of the questionnaires was counterbalanced and short breaks for activity were incorporated between each questionnaire. The procedure took approximately 90 minutes to complete.
Instruments

The multidimensions of perfectionism and self-concept were assessed by questionnaires that have been validated for use with primary school children with a reading level of Year 3 or above.

The Child-Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS) – The Child-Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS, Flett & Hewitt, 1990) measures the source of high standards, and consists of two dimensions of perfectionism: (1) Self oriented perfectionism (i.e., the individual setting high standards of performance for themselves), and (2) Socially-prescribed perfectionism (i.e., the individual’s perception of high expectations from significant others). CAPS consists of 22 items and children are required to respond on a 5-point “true or false” scale. Hewitt and collaborators (2002) reported the Cronbach’s alpha levels of .85 and .86 for Self-oriented perfectionism, and Socially prescribed perfectionism respectively. In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha levels of .87 and .88 for Self-oriented perfectionism, and Socially prescribed perfectionism respectively.

Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale (AMPS) – The Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale (AMPS, Rice & Preusser, 2002) focuses on behaviours manifested in the striving for perfection. AMPS consists of 27 items clustered in 4 dimensions: (1) Sensitivity to mistakes (i.e., children’s fears associated with making mistakes), (2) Compulsiveness (i.e., preferences for order and organisation, and conscientious and persistent approach to task completion), (3) Need for admiration (i.e., interest in being recognised, admired and appreciated for exemplary work and high standards), and (4) Contingent self-esteem (i.e., positive feelings about the self when some of the standards are met). Children are required to respond on a 4-point Likert scales. The Cronbach’s coefficient alphas for AMPS range from .73 to .91 (Rice & Preuss, 2002). The present study focused on the dimensions of Sensitivity to mistakes, Compulsiveness and Need for admiration as research has shown that these are the key behavioural features of perfectionism. In order to avoid the potential “jingle-jangle fallacy” where similar constructs are given different labels or different constructs are given the same label (Marsh, Craven, Hinkley, & Debus, 2003), the last dimension of “Contingent self-esteem” was not included in the present study as there was a possibility of conceptual overlap between
“Contingent self esteem” in AMPS and the self-concept and general self-worth dimensions to be assessed as the outcome variable in SDQ-I.

_Self-Description Questionnaire I (SDQ-I)_ – Self-Description Questionnaire I (SDQ-I, Marsh, 1990) is a well-validated and widely-use measure of multidimensional self-concept in pre-adolescent children. It consists of Academic self-concept (including Reading, Mathematics and General school), Non-academic self-concept (including Physical ability, Physical appearance, Peer relations and Parent relations), and General self-worth (i.e., measure of overall self-esteem). SDQ-I consists of 76 items and children respond on a 5-point “true or false” scale. The internal consistency of the subscales of SDQ-I range from .80 to .94 (Marsh, 1988). In the present study, The internal consistency of the subscales of SDQ-I range from .84 to .92.

**Results**

_Correlation between dimensions of perfectionism and self-concepts_

The Pearson correlations between the multidimensions of perfectionism (CAPS and AMPS) and self-concepts (SDQ-I) are shown in Table 1. As expected, Self-oriented perfectionism significantly correlated with Academic self concept ($r=.37, p<.001$) and General self-worth ($r=.21, p<.001$) in a positive direction. The correlation between Self-oriented perfectionism and Non-academic self-concept was not significant. There were also significant positive correlations between Compulsiveness and all self-concept subscales: Academic self-concept ($r=.29, p<.001$), Nonacademic self-concept ($r=.22, p<.001$) and for General self-worth ($r=.21, p<.001$). Similarly, Need for admiration also significantly correlated with all the self-concept subscales in a positive direction for Academic self-concept ($r=.23, p<.001$), for Non-academic self-concept ($r=.28, p<.001$), and for General self-worth ($r=.23, p<.001$).

Contrary to expectations, Socially-prescribed perfectionism was positively correlated with Academic self-concept ($r=.19, p<.001$) but was not correlated significantly with Non-academic self-concept ($r=.10, p>.05$) and General self-worth ($r=.07, p>.05$).

Also contrary to expectation, Sensitivity to mistakes was significantly correlated in a positive direction with Academic self-concept ($r=.14, p<.05$). Nonetheless, its correlations
with Non-academic self-concept and General self-worth were not significant \((r=-.05, p>.05,\) and \(r=.05, p>.05\) respectively). Unlike adult studies, the present results indicated that nearly all perfectionism dimensions were positively correlated with most self-concept domains in school-aged children.

Table 1. *Pearson correlation coefficients among dimensions of perfectionism and dimensions of self-concept*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subescales</th>
<th>Academic Self-concept</th>
<th>SDQ-I Non-academic self-concept</th>
<th>General self-worth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAPS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-oriented perfectionism</td>
<td>.370***</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>.203***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially-prescribed perfectionism</td>
<td>.188***</td>
<td>.102</td>
<td>.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMPS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to mistakes</td>
<td>.135*</td>
<td>-.049</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsiveness</td>
<td>.288***</td>
<td>.217***</td>
<td>.212***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for admiration</td>
<td>.233***</td>
<td>.275***</td>
<td>.230***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. CAPS = Child and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale, AMPS = Adaptive Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale, SDQ-I = Self Description Questionnaire-I. *\(p < .05. *** \(p < .001*\)

**Discussion**

Much of the literature in the field of perfectionism has focused on such negative correlates as anxiety, depression and poor interpersonal relations. This study, however, supports the contention that perfectionism may well have positive aspects. Certainly, for the 284 school-aged children in this study, most perfectionism and self-concept dimensions were positively correlated with each other. “Self-oriented perfectionism” was associated with an enhanced General self-worth and increased Academic self-concept in mathematics, reading and general school. Contrary to expectations, “Socially-prescribed perfectionism” and “Sensitivity to mistakes” were also significantly positively associated with Academic self-concept, although not with Non-academic self-concept or General self-worth.

In applied terms, therefore, those children who set high standards for themselves were likely to see themselves as good at school subjects, liked mathematics and reading, and were interested in and enjoyed doing schoolwork. They also had overall positive self-images. This is consistent with previous studies among adolescents (Accordion *et al.*, 2000; Dixon *et al.*, 2010).
2004) that found high standards were associated positively with motivation to achieve, high academic self-esteem and better personal adjustment.

A possible explanation for this can be provided by Campbell and Di Paula’s study (2002) that identified two distinct factors within the Self-oriented perfectionism dimension. The first of these, Perfectionistic Striving, reflected positive adjustment and was correlated with higher self-esteem, whereas the other factor, Importance of Being Perfect, was negatively correlated with self-esteem. A study by McCreary, Joiner, Schmidt & Ialango (2004) also found two similar dimensions of Self-oriented perfectionism; a negative self-criticism factor, and a positive striving factor, thereby supporting a comparable two-factor structure as well.

In the present study, it was interesting to find that Compulsiveness and Need for admiration were also associated positively with self-concept and self-worth for some children. In their case, positive self-beliefs accompanied a preference for order, organisation, persistence and conscientiousness in task completion, along with a desire for their achievements to be recognised, admired and appreciated. Studies with adolescents have similarly found that a high need for order and organisation are adaptive (Dixon et al., 2004; Rice et al., 1998).

In this context, however, Flett and Hewitt (2002) argue that order and organization are merely aspects of an individual’s conscientiousness rather than their strivings for perfectionism. They maintain that compulsive preoccupations and a high need for external validation, such as in Socially-prescribed perfectionism, has almost invariably been linked to wide ranging psychopathologies in adolescents and adults (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2002). For the children in the present research, Socially-prescribed perfectionism was not associated negatively with any area of self-concept, in fact, the contrary was evident. It could be argued, therefore, that young children’s perceptions of their competence in school subjects may actually be enhanced by their belief that significant others (parents and teachers) expect high standards of them.

In terms of Erikson’s (1968) theory of psychosocial development, primary school children develop a sense of industry or inferiority and incompetence, depending on feedback from peers, parents and teachers about their achievements. As Erikson points out, if developmental conflicts are resolved positively by the child at this stage, a psychologically healthy sense of industry will emerge that will lead to the next stage, that of positive identity formation. Socially-prescribed perfectionism may not be experienced as an external unrealistic
pressure for young children, but as a reasonable guideline for goal setting. In Campbell and Di Paula’s (2002) study, the perception that acceptance by others depends on attaining high standards, was maladaptive. However, the belief that others have high expectations for the individual was not a critical factor in clinical problems associated with Socially-prescribed perfectionism. This could explain the lack of an association between Socially-prescribed perfectionism and Non-academic self-concept and General self-worth in the current study.

As with Socially-prescribed perfectionism, Sensitivity to mistakes (with its associated concerns about doubts about one’s actions and about criticism from others) has been considered a major negative dimension of perfectionism (Frost et al., 1990), hence, it was expected to be negatively associated with self-concept as previous studies with adults (Frost et al., 1993; Rice et al., 1998), adolescents (Dixon et al., 2004), and children (Parker, 1997; Rice et al., 2004) have demonstrated.

In the current study Sensitivity to mistakes did not have a significant negative association with any self-concept domain; in fact, it was positively associated with Academic self-concept. These results are at odds with the generally accepted view that Sensitivity to mistakes is maladaptive and indicate it was not maladaptive for children with respect to the self-concept domains assessed in the current study. Nonetheless, as neither Socially prescribed perfectionism nor Sensitivity to mistakes were related to General self-worth, it could not be argued that these two dimensions were adaptive. In a related vein, evidence exists that perfectionism may well be related to negative self-evaluative emotions such as shame and guilt (e.g., Choy & Drinnan, 2006; Choy & McInerney, 2005; Tangney, 2002).

Covington (1992) has pointed out that too often self-worth is defined in terms of one’s achievements and ability. As the present study was limited to self-report instruments, future research using a range of data sources such as parent, teacher and student interviews should examine the emotional impact of perfectionism on primary school aged children. Such research should also take into account the demographics of school locations as these reflect socio-economic and cultural differences and aspirations. Longitudinal study of children as they make the transition to adolescence and high school could also prove very valuable with regard to investigating developmental cognitive and affective changes.
In practical terms, the findings from the present study have important implications for children. Parents, teachers and school counsellors play crucial roles in monitoring primary school aged children’s potentially maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies. In particular, they need to teach them how to set realistic personal goals for which to strive (Chang, 2000) and how to develop metacognitive strategies for planning, monitoring, and regulating their progress towards achieving these (Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2000; Torrano & González, 2004).

In terms of the goal theory of motivation (Covington, 2000; McInerney & McInerney, 2006), it would be well also to teach them not to aspire to goals unrealistically prescribed by others, for which failure might be associated with low self-esteem (Kususanto, Nizam & Jamil, 2010). Most importantly in school contexts, teachers and counsellors should help children to understand that learning is about mastery of particular tasks, rather than about demonstrating how “good” they are at performing these tasks. From this perspective, there is no room for such defeatist self descriptions as being “imperfect” or “failing” at something. Rather, mistakes are to be understood as an integral part of learning by identifying formatively what yet needs to be mastered; there is no ego-evaluative connotation associated with errors. In this context, task related effort over performance-related outcome is to be encouraged by parents and teachers alike, and progress towards achieving a goal is to be increasingly self-determined and self rewarded, rather than when a final goal is attained. Self-efficacy for specific competencies will be enhanced in this way, with the consequent positive outcomes for future motivation (Bandura, 1997). Here it would be wise for educators and parents alike to heed the words of Carol Dweck, who has shown that praise for achievements can be truly “dangerous” to students’ self-worth and effort (Dweck, 1999a, 1999b; 2002 a, 2002b).

References


