

Adult Romantic Attachment and Types of Perfectionism

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Abstract

Previous studies examining the relationship between attachment and perfectionism have not included a comprehensive measure of perfectionism that determines subtypes of perfectionism and have not studied the relationship between attachment and perfectionism in adults outside of undergraduate students. Thus, the current study examined the relationship between attachment and types of perfectionism in a sample of nontraditional undergraduate and graduate students. Multiple regression analyses revealed that anxious attachment predicted scores on the self-evaluative perfectionism scales but not on the conscientious perfectionism scales. Implications of the results and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Attachment is an aspect of a person's inner core that is determined as a result of early developmental cues from caregivers (Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby believed that sporadic parental acknowledgment by the mother or primary caregiver leads to the development of an anxious attachment style and the absence of parental acknowledgment leads to an avoidant attachment style. Research suggests that both of these attachment styles are precursors to the development of overall perfectionism (Rice & Lopez, 2004). Furthermore, the result of perfectionist tendencies is then evident in the way individuals face the challenges and expectations of adulthood (Wei, Mallinckrodt, Russell, & Abraham, 2004).

Previous studies have examined only the relationship between attachment and overall perfectionism; that is, they have not determined the specific aspects of perfectionism that are predicted by attachment. The Perfectionism Inventory (Hill et al., 2004) is a newer instrument that contains eight subscales that combine into two factors of perfectionism – conscientious perfectionism, which is considered adaptive, and self-evaluative perfectionism, which is considered maladaptive – allowing research to tease apart these effects. Moreover, these previous studies have included only traditional undergraduate students; that is, these studies have not included other ages of participants (which is necessary to infer the potential lasting consequences of a relationship between attachment and perfectionism). It is possible that maturation and life experiences influence the effect attachment may have over different areas of individuals'

lives, such that previously noted relationships between attachment and perfectionism (e.g., Rice & Lopez, 2004) may not be replicated using a more mature sample. To address these limitations, the present study examines the relationship between attachment and perfectionism using a large number of participants from a non-traditional undergraduate and graduate student population at a small private mid-western university and includes the ability to determine the contributions of anxious and avoidant attachment on both adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism.

Attachment

Throughout the past four decades, researchers have begun to explore how individual differences in attachment influence lives. At the conception of attachment theory, Bowlby (1973; 1977) sought an explanation of the evolutionary process that maintains proximity between infants and caregivers, even in the face of danger or threat. Bowlby (1969) was the first to present the idea that early caregiving experiences, that is, mothers noting and attending to an infant's signals of distress or fear, are internalized as working models in children. Expanding on these ideas, Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth, 1973; Ainsworth et al., 1978) developed the Strange Situation, a system for evaluating and classifying mother-infant dyads into different attachment categories. From this research, Ainsworth identified three types of attachment in infants: secure (in which infants were distressed upon mothers' departure but were comforted upon their return), anxious-ambivalent (in which infants displayed obvious stress upon mothers' departure and return), and anxious-avoidant (in which infants were undisturbed by their mothers' departure and uninterested upon their return). Later, Main and Solomon (1986, 1990) identified a fourth attachment classification: disorganized/disoriented (in which infants seemed confused and used both proximity-seeking and avoidance behaviors).

Correspondence regarding this manuscript may These data were collected in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Susannah Lowell's thesis project for the Master of Science degree. We would like to thank Phil Budd for feedback on this project. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alicia Limke, Department of Psychology, University of Central Oklahoma, 100 N. University Drive, Edmond, OK 73034. E-mail: alimke@uco.edu.

Adult attachment. According to Bowlby (1969), attachment behavior and the influences of early attachment relationships are central to relational functioning throughout the lifespan of early attachment relationships are central to relational functioning throughout the lifespan. Because working models of childhood relationships are internalized, they lead to expectations and beliefs both about the self and about others in later relational contexts. With this in mind, Hazan and Shaver (1987) began the tradition of applying attachment theory to peer and romantic relationships in adulthood. Using the typologies corresponding to the Strange Situation (secure, avoidant, and anxious), the authors created three vignettes to describe adult versions of these styles. Later, in response to methodological and logistical issues, Simpson (1990; see also Collins & Read, 1990) developed a Likert-scale measure using each sentence from the Hazan and Shaver (1987) vignettes. Subsequent research found that the sentences revealed two dimensions of adult attachment: avoidant versus secure and anxious versus non-anxious (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) added a significant piece to the attachment puzzle by suggesting that both evaluations of the self and evaluations of others combine to determine adult attachment styles. They proposed a four-category model: secure (positive views of both the self and others), dismissing (a positive view of the self and a negative view of others), preoccupied (a negative view of the self and a positive view of others), and fearful (negative views of both the self and others). More recently, Brennan and colleagues (1998) developed a continuous measure based on this model, providing analyses of two attachment dimensions (avoidance and anxiety) as well as the four attachment categories.

Perfectionism

Two types of perfectionism comprise a multidimensional construct of perfectionism (cf. Wei et al., 2004). Maladaptive perfectionism is characterized by excessive self-criticism, debilitating self-doubt, and a continuous feeling that principles or expectations have not been met (Rice, Lopez, & Vergara, 2005). Maladaptive perfectionists are also not satisfied when projects are completed and experience a sense of anxiety over these completed tasks (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000). They often feel that what they have done is not good enough and that minor mistakes lead to future failure. These failures are always followed by self-criticism and a feeling of uselessness (Sassaroli & Ruggiero, 2005). Maladaptive perfectionists' unstable self-esteem relentlessly drives them toward the fulfillment of their expectations, creating a compulsion and "anxiety-driven quality" that is not present in more adaptive types of perfectionism (Rice et al., 2005). In contrast, adaptive perfectionism is characterized by standards or goals that are strived to be met, but not at the expense of

individuals' self-esteem. Adaptive perfectionism results in a feeling of accomplishment when tasks are completed, but also allows individuals to permit themselves to be less precise on tasks that are performed (Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000).

Attachment and Perfectionism

Researchers have begun to note a link between attachment and perfectionism. For example, Wei and colleagues (2004) found that both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance predicted perfectionism in a sample of traditional undergraduate students. They suggested that perfectionism may be an outward attempt to hide a deeply troubled and damaged sense of self that is the result of inconsistent and unemotional responses from caregivers early in development. Similarly, Rice and colleagues (2005) found that parental criticism and perfectionism were predictors of attachment avoidance, whereas parental expectations and parental criticism were predictors of attachment anxiety among traditional undergraduate students. Moreover, Wei, Heppner, Russell, and Young (2006) found that maladaptive perfectionism mediated the association between qualities of attachment and the symptoms of depression.

Researchers have proposed that perfectionism stems from variations in the parent-child connections (e.g., Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000). In fact, these "perfectionists" typically report having parents that are harsh and critical, with standards that are too strenuous for the children to meet. Perfectionist behaviors are reinforced by parents because the parents are especially non-approving of typical behaviors. By becoming a perfectionist and disregarding their emotions, children can escape the criticism or discipline of their parents. However, perfectionist tendencies are often accompanied by psychological problems such as depression, eating disturbances, substance abuse, and maladaptive attitudes (Rice & Lopez, 2004). Rice and Lopez suggested that individuals with perfectionist tendencies are especially vulnerable because if they fail, their self-esteem decreases and their depressive symptoms increase. These individuals self-criticize when they experience negative events (e.g., a poor grade on a test), overemphasizing personal responsibility. Rice and Lopez further suggested, however, that the damaging effects of "failure" might not be as exaggerated for securely attached individuals as they are for insecurely attached individuals. That is, students' attachment security may buffer the destructive effects of maladaptive perfectionism.

Current Study

Although these studies (i.e., Rice et al., 2005; Wei et al., 2004; Wei et al., 2006) have demonstrated a link between attachment and perfectionism, they have only included traditional undergraduate students in their samples and have examined only maladaptive forms of perfectionism. To address these limitations, the current study focused on the connection between attachment style

and perfectionism in a sample of non-traditional undergraduate and graduate students using a relatively new measure of perfectionism (i.e., the Perfectionism Inventory; Hill et al., 2004) that provides scores for both adaptive and maladaptive forms of perfectionism. It was expected that the higher the level of anxious attachment, the higher the level of maladaptive perfectionism. It was also expected that the higher the level of avoidant attachment, the higher the level of maladaptive perfectionism.

Method

Participants

Ninety-seven nontraditional¹ undergraduate and graduate students from a small private mid-western university participated in the study. The average age of the participants was 35.38 ($SD = 10.52$). Of the 97 participants, 78.35% were female and 21.65% were male; 79.29% reported that they were White (not Hispanic), 13.40% were Black or African American, 1.03% were American Indian or Alaska Native, 6.19% were Hispanic or Latino(a), and 3.09% were of another race or ethnicity. More than half (57.74%) reported having lived with their biological parents until the age of 18. Of the participants, 14.43% indicated that their current relationship status was single (never been married, and not living with a significant other), 5.15% were single (never been married, living with a significant other), 61.86% were married, 3.09% were married but separated, and 15.46% were divorced.

Materials

Attachment. Participants completed the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The ECR measures two types of attachment styles and contains 36 items on attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. Samples of avoidant attachment questions include “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down,” “Just when my partner starts to get close to me I find myself pulling away,” and “I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.” Samples of anxious attachment questions include “I worry about being abandoned,” “I worry a lot about my relationships,” and “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them.” Participants answered the questions using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Brennan and colleagues have reported that the internal consistency of the measure is strong, .94 for avoidance and .91 for anxiety. They have also suggested that the ECR’s avoidance subscale is similar to other-model dimension proposed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), whereas the anxiety subscale is closely related to the self-model dimension. Scoring of the ECR results in two continuous dimensions (avoidance and anxiety) as well as four categories (secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing).

Perfectionism. Participants also completed the Perfectionism Inventory (Hill et al., 2004), a 59-item questionnaire used to test the multidimensional aspects of perfectionism. Two types of perfectionism each include four subscales. Conscientious Perfectionism (CP) is considered an adaptive form of perfectionism, and includes High Standards for Others (HSO; e.g., “I usually let people know when their work isn’t up to my standards”), Organization (O; e.g., “I am well organized”), Planfulness (P; e.g., “I think through my options before making a decision”), and Striving for Excellence (SE; e.g., “My work needs to be perfect in order for me to be satisfied”). Self-Evaluative Perfectionism (SEP) is considered maladaptive perfectionism, and includes Concern over Mistakes (CM; e.g., “If I make mistakes, people might think less of me”), Need for Approval (NA; e.g., “I am over-sensitive to the comments of others”), Perceived Parental Pressure (PPP; e.g., “I’ve always felt pressure from my parent(s) to be the best”), and Rumination (R; e.g., “If I do something less than perfectly, I have a hard time getting over it”). The scores are based on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Hill and colleagues have reported that the internal consistency is high, ranging from .83 to .91 for all of the subscales.

Procedure

Participants were approached and asked to volunteer to participate in a study that would take place during their normal class time that asks about them, their life experiences, and their attitudes toward success. Each participant was given a packet of testing materials face down (containing the attachment questionnaire, perfectionism questionnaire, and demographic questionnaire, in that order) to complete in one setting.

Results

Scoring of the ECR resulted in the following attachment categories: 39.18% were categorized as secure, 16.49% were fearful, 27.84% were preoccupied, and 16.49% were dismissing. Table 1 displays the correlations between measures of romantic attachment and perfectionism. Although recent research suggests that some demographic characteristics may not be related to perfectionism (e.g., Nagarjuna & Mamidenna, 2008), we began using a 2 x 2 (lived with biological parents x gender) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine differences in attachment and perfectionism. Although there were neither main effects for living with biological parents until the age of 18 (nor any significant interactions), there were main effects for gender for both High Standards for Others (HSO; $M_{\text{males}} = 3.43$, $M_{\text{females}} = 3.04$) and Perceived Parental Pressure (PPP; $M_{\text{males}} = 2.28$, $M_{\text{females}} = 2.92$), $F(1, 93) > 4.16$, $ps < .04$, such that males reported higher standards for others and less perceived parental pressure than did females.

Table 1

Correlations between Measures of Romantic Attachment and Perfectionism

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Avoidance											
2. Anxiety	.24*										
3. Concern over mistakes	.28**	.51**									
4. High standards for others	.15	-.03	.23*								
5. Need for approval	.20	.55**	.82**	-.003							
6. Organization	-.12	-.049	.18	.19	.06						
7. Perceived parental pressure	.08	.27**	.30**	.01	.29**	-.09					
8. Planfulness	.07	.11	.32**	.31**	.28**	.27**	.13				
9. Rumination	.27**	.39**	.84**	.22*	.77**	.09	.36**	.36**			
10. Striving for excellence	.21*	.23*	.70**	.33**	.54**	.36**	.28**	.40**	.70**		
11. Conscientious perfectionism	.11	.20	.53**	.64**	.33**	.66**	.12	.67**	.50**	.78**	
12. Self-evaluative perfectionism	.25*	.52**	.89**	.14	.86**	.07	.63**	.33**	.90**	.67**	.45**

Note. $N = 97$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Next, a multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between attachment and the subscales of perfectionism. For Concern over Mistakes (CM), the model was significant ($R^2 = .29$; $p = .000$). That is, avoidant and anxiety in attachment accounted for 29% of overall variance in CM. Specifically, anxiety predicted CM, $\beta = .47$, $t(94) = 5.28$, $p = .000$, such that the higher the anxiety, the higher the concern over mistakes. The model was also significant for Need for Approval (NA; $R^2 = .31$, $p = .000$). That is, anxiety and avoidance accounted for 31% of overall variance in NA. Specifically, anxiety predicted NA, $\beta = .54$, $t(94) = 5.30$, $p = .000$, such that the higher the anxiety, the higher the need for approval. For Perceived Parental Pressure (PPP), the model was significant ($R^2 = .07$, $p = .01$). That is, anxiety and avoidance accounted for 7% of overall variance in PPP. Specifically, anxiety predicted PPP, $\beta = .26$, $t(94) = 2.55$, $p = .01$, such that the higher the anxiety, the higher perceived parental pressure. The model was also significant for Rumination (R ; $R^2 = .18$; $p = .001$); that is, anxiety and avoidance accounted for 18% of the variance in R. Specifically, anxiety predicted R, $\beta = .34$, $t(94) = 3.58$, $p = .001$, such that the higher the anxiety, the higher the level of rumination. No other significant effects were found.

Discussion

In the current study, results indicated that attachment anxiety (but not attachment avoidance) predicted self-evaluative (maladaptive) perfectionism, such that the higher the level of attachment anxiety, the higher the level of self-evaluative perfectionism traits.

Neither attachment anxiety nor attachment avoidance predicted conscientious (adaptive) perfectionism, however, suggesting that deficiencies in attachment are only related to the emergence of negative coping mechanisms, but are not predictive of the development of healthier ones. The results of the current study are unique findings to the area of attachment and perfectionism because of the use of the Perfectionism Inventory (Hill et al., 2004), which has not been used in previous research and provides indexes of both maladaptive (self-evaluative) and adaptive (conscientious) forms of perfectionism.

The present findings support previous research that has concluded that attachment anxiety is associated with the tendency to set unrealistic standards, concentrate on personal flaws or failures in performances, and engage in strong self-scrutiny (cf. Hill et al., 2004). It is possible that individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety are more sensitive to others' evaluations of them because of fear of judgment and the possibility that others may leave them, leading to clinging behaviors developed during childhood that have persisted into adulthood. The current study also supports studies suggesting that anxiously attached individuals will develop greater levels of perfectionism than will avoidantly attached individuals (Rice & Lopez, 2004; Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000; Wei et al., 2004). The present findings also theoretically agree with the implications of previous research that has suggested that child-rearing practices predict later romantic relationship attachments as well as tendencies toward perfectionism (e.g., Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000). Finally, the

results of this study suggest that attachment security is important for counselors to consider as they work with perfectionist clients, even in an older sample of clients (as this study extends previous findings to a more representative sample of individuals). It is likely that current levels of attachment security may function to either lessen or intensify the negative effects of self-evaluative (maladaptive) perfectionism. Problematic behavior that occurred in early relational experiences is considered in a new therapeutic relationship that, in some respects, replicates the emotional bonds of childhood and is intensely important to the client. According to attachment theory, the “internal working models” of attachment shift through the activation and alteration in the therapy relationship (Parish & Eagle, 2003). The results of long-term psychotherapy influence how individuals relate to others. As clients’ assurances in the reliability of therapists increase, their assurances in the reliability of others also increase.

Strengths and Limitations

Several strengths in the current study’s method and design enhance confidence in the findings. First, this study includes a large sample, increasing the statistical conclusion validity of the study. More importantly, the sample included a wide age range ($M = 35.58$, $SD = 10.52$) that is more representative than the traditional undergraduate college samples used in previous studies of adult attachment and perfectionism (e.g., Rice & Lopez, 2004). By using a sample of participants that is more representative of the population (and temporally more distant from the original attachment figures), the findings of this study can extend the external validity of previous research. Second, both of the instruments used have strong internal consistency, which increases the construct and statistical conclusion validity of the study. Finally, the Perfectionism Inventory (Hill et al., 2004) is a relatively new measure that encompasses several aspects of perfectionism within two perfectionism subscales. It encompasses aspects of previous measures by Hewitt and Flett (1991) as well as by Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate (1990) into one measure. This is beneficial because it prevents researchers from using several testing measures to come to a conclusion about the full scale of perfectionism that can be made by using the Perfectionism Inventory alone (cf. Hill et al., 2004). More importantly, although previous studies have examined the relationship between attachment and perfectionism (e.g., Rice & Lopez, 2004; Rice et al., 2005; Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000; Wei et al., 2004), no previous research has included the Perfectionism Inventory (Hill et al., 2004), which allows the examination of the relationship between attachment and these two perfectionism constructs.

Despite these strengths, the study also has limitations. First, the extent of generalization to other groups is unclear. All participants came from a small,

private, Christian university, and the study did not statistically account for other potentially important factors such as level of education, socioeconomic status, need for approval, or religious affiliation. For example, it is possible that some beliefs of particular religious affiliations encourage perfectionism among parishioners, thereby increasing the tendencies among this type of sample. Second, participants completed the instruments in a classroom setting. It is possible that due to the presence of other individuals during the study, some of the findings may have been the result of participant reactivity. That is, it is possible that participants with high levels of attachment anxiety answered the instrument questions in a way in which they believed they were giving the researcher what they believed the researcher wanted so that they would gain acceptance. Finally, it is important to note that the study is a correlational study; therefore, cause-and-effect relationships cannot be established on the basis of these findings.

Future Research

Future research should be conducted to broaden the scope of the present study. Past research has examined the relationship between attachment and perfectionism in undergraduate students (e.g., Rice & Lopez, 2004; Rice et al., 2005; Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000; Wei et al., 2004), but to date, no study has examined the association between attachment and perfectionism in children. As children mature over time, their attachment styles may become more strongly fixed (cf. Tasca, Taylor, Bissada, Ritchie, & Balfour, 2004). Rather than using romantic relationship scales, a parental attachment measure such as the Parental Bonding Instrument (see Safford, Allo, & Pieracci, 2007, for a review) could be used to examine children’s attachment styles to their parents, as well as to investigate the potential effects on early forms of perfectionism. Based on the present study, it is likely that children who have an anxious attachment to caregivers may be more likely to have early perfectionist tendencies than children with other types of attachment styles, and these tendencies may become stronger as they age. This research could also include a sample of adults with varying ages (such as traditional undergraduates through the elderly) to further examine the generalizability of these results.

Future research could also examine other mediators or moderators of the relationship between attachment and perfectionism. For example, researchers could examine in more depth the effects of other psychological disorders on perfectionist tendencies, such as depression, stress, and anxiety. Research could also examine a more diverse population to evaluate the results of the present study. For example, researchers could conduct a multicultural investigation to examine if cultural differences (such as individualistic or interdependent values) predict levels of attachment, which may influence perfectionism in a different manner than the present study.

Endnote

¹The university defines non-traditional undergraduate programs as programs generally requiring a minimum age of 25 years to enroll. In addition, classes in both non-traditional undergraduate and graduate programs at the university are held one night per week for the duration of the program (which typically lasts for two years), during which, students complete one course (or module) at a time.

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