

Abstract

Perfectionism is conceptualized as the extent to which an individual holds excessively high standards for themselves, and is thought to be multi-dimensional, consisting of maladaptive and beneficial aspects. This paper aimed to examine the new construct of parenting perfectionism, defined as perfectionism specific to the parenting role, through two dimensions: self-oriented, or personal desire for perfection, and societal-oriented, or perceived societal expectations for perfection. Using longitudinal data from a sample of 182 dual-earner couples at the transition to parenthood, as part of the New Parents Project, I investigated the association between parenting perfectionism and parental adjustment. Results indicate that for mothers, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with reduced parenting self-efficacy; however, self-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with increased satisfaction with the parenting role. For fathers, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with higher parenting stress, whereas higher levels of self-oriented parenting perfectionism were associated with increased parenting self-efficacy, less parenting stress, and more satisfaction with parenting. In sum, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism had adverse associations with early parental adjustment, whereas self-oriented parenting perfectionism had beneficial associations with parental adjustment, especially for fathers.

Keywords: parenting perfectionism, parental adjustment, parenting stress.

The transition to parenthood is a monumental life course transition that influences and shapes family roles; during this time new parents are faced with pressures and expectations held by both themselves and society to be a successful or even “perfect” parent. Because the parental role is thought to be one of the most gratifying and rewarding roles in life (Russell, 1974), increased importance and expectations may be placed on this role. The extent of these parental expectations may have an effect on an individual’s adjustment to parenting, specifically parental self-efficacy, parenting stress, and perceived satisfaction with the parenting role. Poor parental adjustment may affect child and family outcomes; thus it is important to identify what may influence parental adjustment.

Parenting perfectionism is conceptualized as the degree to which an individual holds excessively high standards for themselves specific to the parenting role (Snell, Overbey & Brewer, 2005). The potential effects of parenting perfectionism on parenting self-efficacy, parenting stress, and satisfaction in the parenting role may have far-reaching consequences for the development of parent-child relationships at an important stage of family development. The current study aimed to determine the association between parenting perfectionism and early parental adjustment so that parents may be made aware of the possible consequences of holding excessively high standards for the self in this domain.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is the degree to which an individual strives to reach excessively high standards (Hamachek, 1978) and has typically been interpreted as negative due to its associations with neuroticism and psychopathology (Burns, 1980). Hamachek (1978) was among the first to suggest an adaptive nature to perfectionism, positing that perfectionism consisted of two types: normal/healthy, or a personal desire for excellence, and neurotic/unhealthy, or excessive

concerns over mistakes and fear of failure. This monumental study laid the groundwork for future perfectionism research to examine multiple dimensions of this construct. Since Hamachek's assertion, scales have been created to assess various facets of perfectionism, including personal standards, organization, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), rumination, need for approval, and striving for excellence (Hill et al., 2004). A significant portion of the literature has focused on the sources of these types of perfectionistic strivings, and in particular self-oriented, or an individual's desire for perfectionism, societal-oriented, or interpretations of society's expectations for an individual, and other-oriented, expectations held for others (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Stoeber and Otto's (2005) review of the literature indicated core facets to each form of perfectionism, connecting the wide array of terms used in the literature and their outcomes. High personal standards and self-oriented perfectionism have been associated with positive affect (Beiling, Israeli, Smith & Antony, 2003), whereas concerns over mistakes, perceived discrepancy between expectations and reality, and societal-oriented perfectionism have been associated with trait anxiety and psychological symptoms (Suddarth & Slaney, 2001). Comprehensively, societal-oriented perfectionism has been associated with negative outcomes, whereas the consequences of self-oriented perfectionism appear mixed, exposing positive and negative associations.

It may be beneficial to study not only the adaptive vs. maladaptive nature of perfectionism but also the effects it may have on specific domains in life. Because perfectionism is primarily goal-oriented (Hamachek, 1978) it is ideal to study in domains where successes or failures may be easily informed such as academic achievement. Perfectionists often use dichotomous thinking by interpreting their actions as either complete success or complete failure (Egan, Piek, Dyck, & Rees, 2007), yet, research has overlooked the effects that perfectionism

may have on more socially dominated areas of life (i.e., parenting or relationships) when success and failure are more subjective. Because the behavior of others cannot be easily controlled, perfectionists may find more socially oriented roles to be especially frustrating when relationships don't go as expected. Additionally, the expectations to fulfill a specific social role may not be composed of concrete achievements such as an intended grade or goal, but consist of more general expectations pertaining to the social role.

Researchers have recently begun examining the construct of parenting perfectionism and its associations. Snell, et al. (2005) created the first and only scale specifically intended to measure parenting perfectionism, the Multidimensional Parenting Perfectionism Questionnaire (MMPQ). Three of the eleven dimensions of this scale (self-oriented, societal-oriented, and other-oriented) were modeled off of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), and the items were written to reflect perfectionism specific to the parenting role. The development of this scale helps in identifying and measuring the multiple dimensions of this new and understudied construct, providing a means to examine associations between dimensions of parenting perfectionism and parental adjustment.

Parental Self-Efficacy

One form of parental adjustment that may be affected by parenting perfectionism is parental self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is a domain-specific belief that an individual is able to successfully complete a specific task. Parental self-efficacy has been found to have an effect on child outcomes; for example, parents with high parental self-efficacy utilize more positive parenting strategies, thus increasing the probability of better child psychological and academic outcomes (Conrad, Gross, Fogg, & Ruchala, 1992; Teti & Gelfand, 1991). Conversely, individuals with low parenting self-efficacy tend to give up more quickly,

thus decreasing the likelihood of positive child outcomes (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001). Specifically during early parenthood, mothers high on parenting self-efficacy participate in more positive and interactive behavior with their infants (Bohlin & Hagekull, 1987), thus increasing the likelihood of positive child outcomes.

Given the role of dichotomous thinking in perfectionistic individuals, and that self-efficacy is primarily derived from experienced successes and failures (Bandura, 1977), it is possible that individuals that hold excessively high standards will rarely reach their goals. Thus, extremely perfectionistic individuals may routinely view their efforts as complete failures rather than complete successes. This incongruence between excessively high standards and perfectionistic individuals' efforts may damage self-efficacy specific to parenting, thus affecting the parent-child relationship at a crucial developmental time during infancy in which long standing frameworks such as attachment are established within the parent-child relationship (Ainsworth, 1979).

Parenting Stress

Moreover, it is possible that the discrepancy between intended goals and reality may increase stress related to parenting. Parenting stress refers to the stress that is experienced specifically from the role of being a parent. Parents with more parenting stress were less involved and had more negative interactions with their children (McBride & Mills, 1994). High parenting stress has also been associated behavior problems in children (Pett, Vaughncole, & Wampold, 1994). Perhaps these negative interactions that these parents are having with their children are due in part to their parenting stress and ultimately having adverse effects on their child's behavior. In fact, studies indicate that parenting stress has a negative impact on both the parent and child; thus, it is important that the predictors of parenting stress be identified.

Parenting Satisfaction

Parenting satisfaction refers to the degree of satisfaction that is derived from being a parent. Parents that are preoccupied with attaining excessively high standards may not derive as much pleasure from parenting as others. As previously mentioned, parenting perfectionists may have a more difficult time reaching their interpreted goals of being a “perfect” parent. This failure may damage the individual’s early experiences of parenting, and institute a framework of detachment from the parenting role. It is important to develop parenting satisfaction during early parenthood because these early patterns of parenting often persist over time (Lee & Brage, 1989). Those that experience more satisfaction with parenting are likely to participate in more parental activities, strengthening the parent-child relationship, whereas those that experience less satisfaction are likely to disengage from the parenting role, possibly harming the development of this relationship. Satisfaction in the parenting role may increase the likelihood of committed and dedicated parenting, which would have beneficial outcomes for children.

Hypotheses

The completed study aimed to determine the association that the dimensions of parenting perfectionism have with parental adjustment, specifically parenting self-efficacy, parenting stress, and satisfaction with parenting. I addressed this research question utilizing questionnaire data across the transition to parenthood, collecting information from mothers and fathers. It was hypothesized that individuals with high levels of societal-oriented perfectionism would experience the most difficulty with adjustment to parenting and would have lower levels of parenting self-efficacy, higher parenting stress, and less satisfaction with parenting. It was hypothesized that individuals high on self-oriented perfectionism would report low parenting self-efficacy, higher levels of parenting stress, and less satisfaction with parenting, however, not

to the same degree as those parents high on societal-oriented perfectionism. It was believed that both dimensions of perfectionism would be detrimental to parental adjustment due to the interpretative and less controllable nature of social roles and relationships.

Methods

Sample

Data were drawn from The New Parents Project, a longitudinal study of 182 couples making the transition to parenthood. The purpose of The New Parents Project was to examine family and child development across the first transition to parenthood. Criteria for inclusion in the study included the following: participants had to be over the age of 18, able to speak English, expecting their first child, married or cohabiting, and dual-earners with an intention of returning to work after the infant was born. Participants were recruited through childbirth education classes, newspaper ads, movie ads, and snowball sampling in a large Midwestern city. A majority of the sample was white (85%), married (86%), and highly educated with 34% higher than a bachelors degree. The median household income for these dual earner couples was \$81,000 a year.

Procedure

Data were collected at four points across the transition to parenthood: the third trimester of pregnancy (phase 1), 3 months post-partum (phase 2), 6 months post-partum (phase 3), and 9 months post-partum (phase 4). At phase 1 participants completed questionnaires assessing parenting perfectionism. At phases 2, 3, and 4, participants completed questionnaires measuring parental self-efficacy, parenting stress, and satisfaction in the parenting role.

Measures

For this study data were used from two time points of the New Parents Project. At Phase 1, when mothers were in their third trimester, surveys were administered including a shortened 12-item version of the Multidimensional Parenting Perfectionism Questionnaire (Snell, et al., 2005), a measure closely related to general perfectionism questionnaires but modified to assess perfectionism in the context of parenting. The MPPQ responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= *not at all characteristic of me* and 5= *very characteristic of me*) and included two 4-item dimensions that were the focus of this study: self-oriented parenting perfectionism (i.e., I set very high standards for myself as a parent) and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism (i.e., Only if I am a “perfect” parent will society consider me to be a good parent). At Phase 2 respondents completed surveys including a ten item version of the Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale (Teti & Gelfand, 1991) which included items such as “When your baby is upset, fussy or crying, how good are you at soothing him or her?” that parents rated on a 4-point scale (1= *not good at all* and 4= *very good*). Parents also completed a subset of five items assessing parenting stress measured on a four point likert scale (1=*strongly agree* and 4= *strongly disagree*) from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (i.e., Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be) and the Motherhood/Fatherhood Satisfaction/Meaning Scale (1= *never* and 5= *very often*) which included items such as “My baby makes me feel useful”.

Results

First, paired-samples *t*-tests were performed to examine differences between mothers and fathers. Table 1 indicates that fathers were significantly higher on self-oriented parenting perfectionism, whereas mothers reported greater parenting self-efficacy and satisfaction with the parenting role. A trend also emerged indicating that mothers were higher on societal-oriented parenting perfectionism.

Next, correlations were performed on the data and it was found that parenting perfectionism had a unique relation with parental adjustment for both mothers and fathers (Table 2). Significant relations emerged in the initial correlations; however, further statistical analysis was needed to further differentiate parenting perfectionism from other related characteristics. Partial correlations were performed, controlling for Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and the other dimension of parenting perfectionism. Even after controlling for these variables, parenting perfectionism was related to all three measures of parental adjustment and in unique ways for mothers and fathers. For mothers, self-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with higher reports of parenting self-efficacy and more satisfaction with parenting, whereas societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with lower parenting self-efficacy. For fathers, self-oriented parenting perfectionism was significantly related to all three measures of parental adjustment. Fathers high on self-oriented parenting perfectionism reported higher parenting self-efficacy, lower parenting stress, and more satisfaction with parenting, whereas societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with higher levels of parenting stress.

Discussion

It was originally hypothesized that both self-oriented and societal-oriented parenting perfectionism would be associated with poorer parental adjustment because social roles are more interpretive; however, the hypothesis was not fully supported. As expected, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism did not bode well for parental adjustment, but surprisingly, self-oriented parenting perfectionism was beneficial to parental adjustment for mothers and especially for fathers. However, previous literature on perfectionism has proposed mixed findings for self-oriented perfectionism with no clear indication of its adaptive or maladaptive nature. These

findings help to support the multi-dimensionality of parenting perfectionism by suggesting both maladaptive and beneficial associations with parental adjustment.

Researchers have posited that perhaps the negative outcomes (i.e., stress) that result from perfectionistic strivings originate not only from perceived failures, but also from the way individuals cope with perceived failures (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008). It is possible that self-oriented parenting perfectionism has less of a self-critical element than societal-oriented parenting perfectionism. For instance, an individual high on self-oriented parenting perfectionism may fail to reach their excessively high standards, however, they may not partake in harsh self-scrutiny and instead deal with their shortcomings in an adaptive way. In contrast, perhaps individuals high on societal-oriented parenting perfectionism harbor more self-critical thoughts and have more difficulty in overcoming these perceptions that society has of them. Due to the lack of research on parenting perfectionism it is difficult to determine with certainty how these multiple dimensions of perfectionism operate.

In order to better understand parenting perfectionism, limitations of the current study must be addressed in future research. It is possible that the relationship between affect, self-efficacy and the setting of standards may be cyclical. Negative mood may have an influence over an individual's self-efficacy and in turn have an impact on the degree to which goals for a particular task are set (Cervone, Kopp, Schaumann, & Scott, 1994), rather than standards affecting self-efficacy. The association or direction of effects between these constructs is not clear, therefore, a weakness of this study is that parenting perfectionism was only measured at one time point, making it difficult to examine another possible direction of effects. Additionally, due to the method of sampling and the small sample size, the study is not generalizable to the population. However, this can be seen as a possible strength to the study because parenting

perfectionism may be more salient in this group (i.e., high-SES first-time parents). It is possible that parenting perfectionism may be more prominent in more highly educated groups due to the competitive and goal-oriented atmosphere of academics that college graduates have been exposed to.

Because of these limitations, future studies should include a multi-methodological approach, including observational measures of parenting perfectionism alongside self-report measures at multiple time points during the transition to parenthood. Additionally, measures of self-critical perfectionism should be administered to determine if there is a difference in the way individuals are reacting to their perceived failures. Future studies should also examine parenting perfectionism in lower-income or less educated samples; this information would help to determine if parenting perfectionism is more common among certain educational levels or SES statuses as I have speculated.

Because research on perfectionism has been limited to certain domains in life, discovering the far-reaching influence on relationships needs to be further examined. Perfectionism has been closely linked with certain personality traits and has been shown to be salient to individuals. These perfectionist strivings may have a large impact on the setting of standards, and have lasting effects on partners and children surrounding the perfectionist. Revealing the consequences of perfectionism is important for both the effects on the individual and their family relationships. Recognizing these perfectionistic behaviors and the possible positive or negative effects may increase awareness of perfectionism and help parents to better adjust to parenthood. Because the literature linking together individual cognitions and familial relationships is scarce, researchers need to consider the benefits to families and further the literature on perfectionism specific to the parenting role.

Table 1: Paired Samples t-tests

	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
Mother Self-oriented	3.20	.85	-2.05*
Father Self-oriented	3.36	.84	
Mother Societal-oriented	2.42	.86	1.92 ⁺
Father Societal-oriented	2.27	.74	
Mother Self-efficacy	3.46	.31	8.96**
Father Self-efficacy	3.15	.41	
Mother Parenting Stress	2.94	.54	-1.02
Father Parenting Stress	2.99	.51	
Mother Parenting Satisfaction	3.92	.54	5.59*
Father Parenting Satisfaction	3.60	.60	

*p<.05 **p<.01, ⁺ represents a trend

Table 2: Partial correlations of parenting perfectionism and parental adjustment

Mother's Parental Adjustment			
	Parenting Self- efficacy	Parenting Stress	Parenting Satisfaction
Self-oriented parenting perfectionism	.15* (.08)	.10 (.04)	.15* (20*)
Societal-oriented parenting perfectionism	-.21** (-.15*)	.10 (-.02)	.01 (-.13)
Father's Parental Adjustment			
	Parenting Self- efficacy	Parenting Stress	Parenting Satisfaction
Self-oriented parenting perfectionism	.12 (.16*)	-.04 (-.17*)	.21** (.16*)
Societal-oriented parenting perfectionism	-.04 (-.03)	.18 * (.18*)	.18* (.05)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ Note: Values not in parenthesis indicate correlations, and values in parenthesis indicate partial correlations

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