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Introducing Perfectionistic Climate

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Abstract

Perfectionism has historically been conceptualised as a personality characteristic – a personal quality of the individual. In this paper, we propose a new conceptualization of perfectionism that focuses on aspects of the social environment that are perfectionistic. Based upon motivational theory, we consider perfectionistic climate to be informational cues and goal structures aligned with the view that performances must be perfect and less than perfect performances are unacceptable. Perfectionistic climate has five components of expectation, criticism, control, conditional regard, and anxiousness. We define and describe each of these components and highlight the similarities and differences between these and existing concepts. We also draw on research that has examined similar concepts to inform our speculation on the possible consequences of perfectionistic climates for the development of perfectionism and its role in intervention work. We believe that the study of perfectionistic climate has the potential to extend perfectionism research considerably and highlights how people can still suffer the consequences of perfectionism through the environment without ever fully internalizing the personal quality themselves.

Key words: perfectionism, personality, social

44 **Introducing Perfectionistic Climate**

45 Perfectionism has many guises or faces (Benson, 2003). However, one of the notable
46 aspects of research examining perfectionism to date is the way perfectionism has been
47 considered exclusively as a characteristic or quality of the individual. Trait models of
48 perfectionism, for instance, have focused on the core aspects of perfectionism that individuals
49 display to identify the degree to which they are perfectionistic. In addition, even extended
50 models of perfectionism, focusing on distinctly cognitive aspects of perfectionism or
51 distinctly interpersonal aspects of perfectionism, have remained within a broad personality
52 framework (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998; Hewitt et al., 2003). With this in mind,
53 it is our view that the study of perfectionism would benefit from additional and alternative
54 perspectives that extend beyond a personality framework.

55 In order to encourage researchers to adopt an alternative perspective, in this paper we
56 propose a new concept: *perfectionistic climate*. Unlike existing trait and extended models of
57 perfectionism, the concept of perfectionistic climate is not focused on the characteristics or
58 qualities of the individual themselves. Rather, perfectionistic climate is focused on aspects of
59 the social environment and, in particular, aspects of the social environment that are
60 perfectionistic. Our main contention is that perfectionism can be studied from a socio-
61 environmental perspective grounded in objective features of the environment and subjective
62 experiences of the environment. We also assert that by conceiving of perfectionism in this
63 way, we can further our understanding of both the development of perfectionism and its
64 broader effects. Importantly, we will also illustrate how people can still suffer the
65 consequences of perfectionism without ever fully internalizing the personal quality
66 themselves.

67 We first briefly describe the theoretical basis of perfectionistic climate. In doing so,
68 we define perfectionistic climate and identify its core components. We then summarise what
69 we consider the key implications of introducing this new concept for research and
70 practitioners, before discussing the role of perfectionistic climate in the development of
71 perfectionism, its broader consequences, and importance for intervention work.

72 **Theoretical basis of perfectionistic climate**

73 In defining perfectionistic climate, we reviewed various definitions of achievement
74 climates drawn from Achievements Goal Theory (AGT; Nicholls, 1984, 1989); in particular,
75 the seminal work of Ames (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Ames & Ames, 1984).
76 Having done so, we propose that perfectionistic climate is defined as the informational cues
77 and goal structures (i.e., what people are expected to accomplish and how they are to be
78 evaluated) aligned with the view that performances must be perfect and less than perfect
79 performances are unacceptable. Couching perfectionistic climate within AGT provides a
80 sound theoretical footing for the concept. It also places perfectionistic climate alongside other
81 climates that include information pertinent to how individuals construe success and failure
82 (ego-involving or task-involving climates) and that have been studied in regard to how they
83 are created by significant others such as parents, teachers, coaches, and peers (Ames &
84 Archer, 1988; Seifriz, Duda, & Chi, 1992; White, Duda, & Hart, 1992).

85 The proposed components of perfectionistic climate are derived from existing models of
86 perfectionism (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990), models of the development of
87 perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & McDonald, 2002; Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, 2017), and
88 more broadly, from other theoretical models that have been applied to studying the
89 development of perfectionism (Self-Determination Theory, SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). In
90 drawing upon existing theoretical models, we aim to strengthen the theoretical basis for

91 perfectionistic climate and its components. In addition, it also allows us to highlight
92 similarities and differences between existing approaches and our new concept. Finally, as no
93 published research yet exists that has examined perfectionistic climate, drawing on more
94 established approaches means we can inform our speculation regarding the likely effects of
95 perfectionistic climate using existing empirical work.

96 The first two components of perfectionistic climate are unrealistic expectations that one
97 should perform perfectly (expectation) and harsh criticism when performances are not perfect
98 (criticism). There are several important features to note for these two components. First, we
99 have been purposeful in our focus on “unrealistic” standards as opposed to high, very high, or
100 exceptionally high standards. Unrealistic standards are rigid, exceed what is reasonable or
101 realistic given actual ability or other situational constraints, and are maintained in the face of
102 achievement difficulties or failure. Second, for criticism, we use the term “harsh” to convey
103 that others are critical even of minor, inconsequential mistakes, and despite best effort,
104 personal improvement, or objective success. Essentially, we consider high standards and
105 critical evaluation of performance to be a vital part of most achievement domains, but
106 unrealistic standards and harsh criticism to be unnecessary and perfectionistic.

107 Expectation and criticism are already evident in perfectionism research in the form of
108 parental expectations and parental criticism (Frost et al., 1990) or parental pressure and coach
109 pressure (Dunn, Causgrove Dunn, & Syrotuik, 2002). The notable difference here from
110 existing approaches to these components is that we consider the two components to be
111 applicable beyond parents and coaches to various significant others (e.g., teachers and peers).
112 We also believe that the two components are best studied independently rather than collapsed
113 into a broader component of pressure. This is because research has found parental expecta-
114 tions and parental criticism have different consequences and interact with each other
115 (McArdle & Duda, 2008). Most importantly, perhaps, we propose that these components

116 should no longer be studied as core features of trait perfectionism and, instead, are better
117 located in a measure of the degree to which the social environment is perfectionistic. This
118 recommendation reflects their status as antecedents of trait perfectionism as opposed to being
119 core defining features (Frost et al., 1990; Rhéaume et al., 2000; Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn,
120 2002).

121 The third component of perfectionistic climate is coercive behavior used to pressure
122 perfect performance (control). Drawing on SDT, controlling climate refers to an environment
123 that is coercive and puts pressure on others to feel, think, and behave in a particular way
124 (Self-Determination Theory, SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). There are a number of important
125 features to note for the control component of perfectionistic climate. First, for perfectionistic
126 climate, control has a narrow focus on controlling behaviors that are exhibited with the
127 intention of preventing even minor mistakes and pressuring the attainment of perfect
128 performance. Second, our control component is primarily focused on externally controlling
129 contingencies that put pressure on perfect performance. Externally controlling contingencies
130 include the use of threats, punishments, rewards, and other power-assertive strategies that are
131 controlling and limit autonomy. In other words, the coercive strategies that people employ
132 (e.g., “The coach uses rewards and punishments to encourage perfect performance”). The
133 importance of including such coercive and punitive strategies is evident in research
134 examining parental factors influencing the development of perfectionism (Speirs Neumeister,
135 2004).

136 The fourth component of perfectionistic climate captures the withdrawal or
137 manipulation of recognition and appreciation based upon the attainment of perfect
138 performance (conditional regard). Conditional regard includes a focus on more positive
139 treatment following perfect performance and more negative treatment following imperfect
140 performance. Closely related to the control component of perfectionistic climate, conditional

141 regard is taken from SDT and reflects an important feature of a controlling climate that is
142 coercive, manipulative, and highly authoritarian (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Similar to controlling
143 strategies, conditional regard has also been linked to the development of perfectionism
144 (Curran, Hill, & Williams, 2017). Unlike external controlling strategies, however, conditional
145 regard is a predominantly internally controlling expression of control. That is, it is behaviors
146 that elicit a desire to gain feelings of acceptance and avoid of feelings of shame or guilt (e.g.,
147 “The coach is more upset and unapproachable when performances are not perfect”). In line
148 with SDT, we regard conditional regard as a distinct expression of control (Ryan & Deci,
149 2017; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010) that warrants inclusion alongside the control
150 component as part of a perfectionistic climate.

151 The final component of perfectionistic climate pertains to worry and vigilance regarding
152 mistakes and the consequences of not performing perfectly (anxiousness). This component
153 includes overprotective behaviors that reflect an irrational preoccupation with mistakes, an
154 aversion to novel and uncontrollable circumstances, and excessive worry regarding welfare
155 and safety. This component is drawn from the model of Flett et al. (2002) in which
156 perfectionism develops in a family environment when parents display an excessive focus on
157 mistakes and the negative implications of not being perfect (anxious rearing pathway).
158 Anxiousness also aligns with AGT and an ego-involving climate in which parents can display
159 excessive worry about mistakes made by their children (White et al., 1992; White, 1996).
160 This kind of worry-conducive climate that has been found to be positively related to
161 perfectionism in young athletes (Gustafsson, Hill, Stenling, and Wagnsson, 2016).

162 **Implications of perfectionistic climate**

163 The introduction of the concept of perfectionistic climate has three main implications
164 for the study of perfectionism. First, perfectionism should not be viewed and studied solely as

165 a feature (or problem) of the individual. Rather, perfectionism can be studied as a broader
166 social pressure that will not only make people more or less likely to develop perfectionism,
167 but also prone to experience the consequences of perfectionistic pressure without ever fully
168 adopting it as a personal quality. Second, because the consequences of more or less
169 perfectionistic climates can be studied independently of trait perfectionism, the social-
170 environmental aspects of different achievement contexts will become the primary focus of
171 inquiry for some researchers. Third, the concept of perfectionistic climate emphasizes the
172 need for more purposeful construction of social environments, particularly for young people,
173 by practitioners, and it foregrounds interventions focused on teacher, parent, and coach
174 education aimed at reducing components of the environment that are perfectionistic.

175 **Development of perfectionism**

176 We conceived of perfectionistic climate partly with the development of perfectionism
177 in mind and drawing from both recent proposals on the development of perfectionism and
178 previous proposals based on multiple pathways. Regarding recent proposals, Hewitt et al.
179 (2017) highlight various early childhood experiences that are relevant to the development of
180 perfectionism. The focus is primarily on how asynchrony (or mismatch) between a child's
181 attachment needs (e.g., the need for affection, nurturance, and reassurance) and a caregiver's
182 responses provide the basis for the development of perfectionism. For instance, when a
183 caregiver is experienced as being unresponsive or inconsistent in fulfilling attachment needs,
184 young children may develop a view of themselves as flawed and unworthy, and others as
185 unavailable and critical. This fragile sense of self and negative view of others, in turn, instils
186 beliefs that being or appearing perfect to others will provide respite from rejection and lead to
187 acceptance. The components of perfectionistic climate are relevant in this regard, as they too
188 capture features of the social environment that undermine a sense of unconditional
189 acceptance and will give rise to a view of others as non-responsive, neglectful, and overly

190 critical. As such, we believe that a perfectionistic climate will lay a foundation for
191 asynchrony and perfectionism in young people.

192 Regarding previous proposals on the development of perfectionism, Flett et al. (2002)
193 outlined a conceptual model incorporating several factors pertinent to the development of
194 perfectionism (e.g., child factors, parental factors, and environmental factors). This model
195 places an emphasis on family factors and the role of parents in contributing to the
196 development of perfectionism. In particular, the model considers multiple family
197 environments that are shaped by parents and that have the potential to maintain, reinforce, or
198 further exacerbate the development of perfectionism in young people. These family contexts
199 include demanding environments in which parental acceptance is contingent on meeting
200 unrealistically high parental standards (social expectations pathway), hostile environments in
201 which parents engage in harsh parental practices (social reaction pathway), and intense
202 environments in which parents are excessively worried about mistakes and the negative
203 implications of not being perfect (anxious rearing pathway). These pathways emphasise
204 parenting styles and practices (what parents do) that shape the immediate family environment
205 in which perfectionism develops. This contrasts with the other developmental pathway that
206 emphasize the personality of parents (who parents are) and the tendency for young children to
207 model or imitate perfectionism from their parents (social learning pathway). We consider
208 perfectionistic climate to straddle the first three pathways by encompassing the behaviors,
209 practices, and relational styles exhibited by significant others.

210 **Pervasive consequences of perfectionistic climate**

211 We believe that perfectionistic climate has special relevance to the development of
212 perfectionism. However, we also consider that children and adolescents' experiences of a
213 highly perfectionistic climate will more broadly thwart the capacity to thrive and contribute

214 to various undesirable outcomes. We are thinking specifically of research on how different
215 motivational climates have a variety of important consequences for young people. For
216 instance, from an AGT perspective, research in various contexts (e.g., education and sport)
217 has shown that perceptions of an ego-involving climate—in which key social agents (e.g.,
218 teachers, coaches, and instructors) emphasise the importance of outperforming others, regard
219 mistakes as worthy of punishment, and value only the most superior performers—are
220 typically related with various undesirable achievement-related outcomes in young people. For
221 instance, an ego-involving climate has been found to undermine friendship quality, give rise
222 to negative cognitions and emotions (e.g., higher anxiety, lower enjoyment, lower
223 confidence), and confer vulnerability to ill-being in the form of burnout (Duda, Papaioannou,
224 Appleton, Quested, & Krommidas, 2014; Harwood, Keegan, Smith, & Raine, 2015). On this
225 basis, we would anticipate that a perfectionistic climate will be relevant to the same social-
226 cognitive outcomes linked to an ego-involving climate.

227 The role of significant others in shaping the motivational climate has also been
228 examined from an SDT perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research in this area has focused
229 on controlling behaviors in the roles of teachers, parents, and coaches in educational, family,
230 and sporting contexts (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009).
231 Researchers have found that perceptions of controlling climates are typically related to less
232 favourable outcomes and experiences in young people. For instance, a controlling climate has
233 been found to thwart psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, give
234 rise to more undesirable forms of motivation, and confer vulnerability to a range of negative
235 outcomes such as depression and burnout (e.g., Barcza-Renner, Eklund, Morin, & Habeeb,
236 2016; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Like a controlling climate, perfectionistic climate encompasses
237 components that are likely to hinder optimal psychological development and undermine well-

238 being. Therefore, we would anticipate similarity between the consequences associated with a
239 controlling climate and a perfectionistic climate.

240 **Intervention and perfectionism**

241 In keeping with current personality approaches to perfectionism, as far as we are
242 aware, all attempts to manage or treat perfectionism have focused on the individual. In a
243 recent meta-analysis assessing evidence for interventions targeting perfectionism, Lloyd,
244 Schmidt, Khondoker, and Tchanturia (2015) identified eight studies examining
245 psychotherapy interventions targeting perfectionism and associated adjustment difficulties
246 (anxiety and depression). In all studies, some form of cognitive behavioral therapy was
247 employed. Although the specific format (e.g., individual therapy *versus* self-help therapy)
248 and duration (e.g., number of sessions) of the interventions varied, Lloyd et al. (2015) found
249 evidence to support the efficacy of cognitive behavioral interventions in reducing
250 perfectionism on an individual basis. These findings are promising but, as others have
251 highlighted, perfectionism is notoriously difficult to treat and long-term change especially
252 hard to obtain (Hewitt et al., 2017). Considering these clinical difficulties, it seems
253 particularly important for intervention work also to include measures that target the relational
254 context in which perfectionism develops and is maintained. In this regard, we consider
255 perfectionistic climate to be an important area of intervention that could help prevent the
256 development and maintenance of perfectionism.

257 The advent of perfectionistic climate means that intervention efforts could focus on
258 educating key social agents (e.g., teachers, parents and coaches) on the various behaviors,
259 practices, and relational styles that contribute to a perfectionistic climate. The creation and
260 distribution of educational resources would be useful, with programmatic schemes of training
261 likely being the most effective. Intervention work of this kind has taken place, guided by key

262 tenets of AGT and SDT (e.g., Braithwaite, Spray, & Warburton, 2011; Su & Reeve, 2011).
263 These efforts have involved manipulating the social environment to reduce ego-involving and
264 controlling features by promoting more task-involving and autonomy-supportive features
265 (e.g., encouraging task mastery over outperforming others and providing personal freedom
266 over personal repression). The studies in this area have provided evidence to support the
267 efficacy of such interventions. This is apparent both in terms of how such interventions have
268 evidenced change in the behaviours of social agents, and how such changes manifest in more
269 positive experiences for those in the environment (e.g., less anxiety, more enjoyment, and
270 less likely to dropout). We believe that similar interventions hold great promise in regard to
271 reducing the development of trait perfectionism and its negative effects.

272 **Conclusion**

273 We have argued for the study of perfectionism to be broadened beyond a focus on the
274 characteristics or qualities of an individual to a focus on features of the social environment
275 that are perfectionistic. To do so, we have proposed a new concept—perfectionistic climate—
276 that includes components drawn from different theoretical approaches. We consider
277 perfectionistic climate to be which are especially relevant to the development of
278 perfectionism, but also have broad consequences for improving experiences for children and
279 adolescents. We encourage researchers and practitioners to consider the relevance and value
280 of this concept in their future work, including the development and assessment of
281 interventions to reduce perfectionism and its negative effects.

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