Towards Understanding the Concept of Perfectionism and its Psychological Implications for National Development

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Abstract

This paper reviews literature on the concept of perfectionism with the aim of exploring the various ways it affects human behavior and the strategies people can adopt to overcome its negative effect especially in Nigeria. It was pointed out that recent studies suggest that perfectionism has some positive impact; it is not strength but a great weakness. Literature indicates that 80% of perfectionists end up with some psychological defects like depression, frustration, anxiety, stress, self-criticism, self-anger and sometimes suicide. Some of the specific psychological strategies to overcome the problem of perfectionism were enumerated.

Keywords: Psychology, Perfectionism, Human Behaviour, Inferiority Complex, Anxiety, National Development

INTRODUCTION

Psychology as a discipline is only fifty years old in Nigeria and the public has not fully understood the essence of the discipline. As a result of the newness psychology as course of study, the discipline has not made much impact in terms of its application in solving individual and societal problems. Indeed, perfectionism, in psychology, is a personality trait characterized by a person’s striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high performance standards, accompanied by overly critical self-evaluations and concerns regarding others’ evaluations (Stoeber and Childs, 2010; Flett and Hewitt, 2002). It is best conceptualized as a multidimensional characteristic, as psychologists agree that there are many positive and negative aspects. In its maladaptive form, perfectionism drives people to attempt to achieve an unattainable ideal, and their adaptive perfectionism can sometimes motivate them to reach their goals. In the end, they derive pleasure from doing so. When perfectionists do not reach their goals, they often fall into depression (Yang and Stoeber, 2012). Perfectionism is often mistaken for ‘being perfect’ or ‘doing something perfectly’. Many people assume that it must be a good thing. Other people think of being a perfectionist as being something negative and embarrassing.

The idea that perfectionism can be either a positive or negative personality trait stems from Alfred Adler’s Individual Psychology (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1991). Adler believed that all humans have perfectionistic tendencies because “striving for perfection is innate”. Adler also differentiated the normal aspects of perfectionism (e.g., striving to improve one’s environment) from the abnormal aspects (e.g., striving to obtain an unattainable goal). Hamachek (1978) had a similar view as Adler and believed that “normal” perfectionists strive to do their best and are not overly discouraged if they cannot do everything perfectly, whereas “neurotic” perfectionists strive for standards that cannot be met.

Perfectionism, in general, is considered to have several key characteristics, such as high standards (Aldea and Rice, 2006; Rice and Ashby, 2007), self-criticism (Grzegorek et al., 2004), and a need for order (Rice et al, 1998). However, current research suggests that perfectionism is a multidimensional construct consisting of both positive and negative qualities. Researchers typically study perfectionism in two ways, either from an orientation perspective, or from an adaptive perspective. Hewitt and Flett (1991) posit that perfectionism exists on three basic dimensions: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism is having high standards and a motivation to obtain perfection for one. Conversely, socially prescribed perfectionism is the perception that one must obtain perfection to
satisfy others. Lastly, other-oriented perfectionism is expecting others to be perfect.

Much of the experimental research on perfectionism has been based on the person-oriented perspective, which tends to focus on the negative personal and social aspects of perfectionism. In contrast, the adaptive perspective has been mostly supported through correlational studies, focusing on the positive aspects of perfectionism and how they relate to academic performance, self-esteem, and Self-efficacy. It will be unfair to talk about perfectionism and be silent on perfectionist. Encarta Dictionary (2009) defined perfectionist as somebody who demand to achieve nothing less than perfection and believes in the philosophical doctrine of perfectionism. Thesaurus on the other hand described a perfectionist as purist, pedant, obsessive, quibbler, hairsplitter, and fusspot.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Over the years, studies (Aldea and Rice, 2006; Rice and Ashby, 2007) have shown that perfectionism is a weakness that gradually erodes the strength of behavior. Even though some researchers believe that perfectionism is not completely a weakness, but the moral is clear that most perfectionists end up being frustrated, stressed up, depressed, and self-angered because of the unachieved goal they set for themselves.

Looking closely at the Nigerian context, most of the necessities of life are becoming luxuries for the last man in the country. Perfectionists find it very difficult to survive in Nigeria reason is that the resources to achieve their set goals is hoarded by the few, and that makes it limited or scarce. Corruption is at a high increase, there is issue of unemployment, selfishness, ethnicity, religiosity etc. all these problems live perfectionists with the feeling of procrastination, fear of failure and un-accomplishment

PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW.

In view of the above problems, this paper seeks to find out empirically through literatures how this personality trait is formed, its effects on behavior and the way forward.

THE CONCEPT OF PERFECTIONISM

Although traditional researchers exploring perfectionism frequently cast the construct in a negative light, a steady stream of recent studies have demonstrated that perfectionistic beliefs can yield both positive and negative outcomes. Despite this progression in the research, perfectionism remains an understudied phenomenon among youth, especially as it relates to the ways in which others perceive these individuals. Traditional views of perfectionism typically portrayed the construct as a severe indicator of maladjustment. While most individuals agreed that the placement of high standards was a core aspect of perfectionism, it was believed that standards were elevated to such an extent that they were unattainable, inevitably leading to disappointment, reduced self-worth and other severe consequences (Horney, 1990).

Horney felt that perfectionism was a response to feelings of inferiority and neuroticism, whereas Allmen (2003) conceptualized these elevated benchmarks as forms of neuroticism that stressed flawlessness. Overall, perfectionists were frequently characterized as being cognitively dysfunctional (Beck, 1976).

One area in the perfectionism literature, which has produced minimal investigation, involves the effects of gender. Among the few studies examining gender differences among perfectionists, the majority have pointed to few if any significant distinctions. Although, Parker (1997) suggested that females may have a higher propensity to be identified as adaptive perfectionists and males more likely to be labeled non-perfectionists, several studies have revealed data that does not support significant sex discrepancies across cluster of perfectionism (Grzegorek et al., 2004; Rice and Dellwo, 2002). It should be noted however, that the majority 21 of studies exploring potential gender differences have focused largely on college-aged samples. Therefore, caution must be lent to the interpretation of these findings. It would be unwise to automatically extend these findings to childhood and adolescent manifestations of perfectionism. Interestingly, in a study exploring potential disparities among children, Siegle and Schuler (2000) found some significant differences. Namely, that girls, tended to report greater parental expectations and demands as well as concern over mistakes than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, a more recent study failed to replicate these findings (Sondergeld et al., 2007). Given that, the data on this subject is far from conclusive, and that the APS-R was typically not the measure of choice in the aforementioned studies, the potential of significant gender differences emerging when examining mean levels of perfectionism warrants future investigation.

A study conducted by Rice et al., (2006) examined the social relationships among Perfectionists by examining their degree of perceived social connectedness. Results revealed some associations between perfectionism and social
connectedness. In particular, social connectedness partially mediated the effect of perfectionism on depression. Another investigation, conducted by Rice et al., (2004) included fourth and fifth grade students and noted a negative relationship between a commonly identified aspect of maladaptive perfectionism (being excessively concerned over mistakes) and a student's self-perceived popularity. Although these studies yielded significant contributions, noteworthy gaps remain constant across the literature. More specifically, the exclusive use of self-report measures has been questioned in the personality literature (Alexander, 2013). The limitations inherent in this method may be particularly salient among maladaptive perfectionists, who by definition are compelled to avoid failure or be perceived as anything less than stellar (Benjamin et al., 2012).

The author studied perfectionism: the good, the bad and the creative. Their result shows that the influence of adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism on creativity was examined. Initially, six measures of creativity were administered, including creative self-perceptions, behavior, and performance measures. Adaptive perfectionism was weakly positively related to creativity, whereas maladaptive perfectionism was unrelated to creativity across five of the six measures. A follow-up study assessed whether initial findings could be generalized to an everyday problem-solving task. Results indicated that adaptive perfectionism was related to higher quality but not originality of solutions. Further, a curvilinear relationship in the shape of an inverted “U” occurred between adaptive perfectionism and four of eight creativity measures. Overall, adaptive perfectionism was consistently, albeit weakly, related to creativity across various types of measures, whereas maladaptive perfectionism was not related to creativity.

Perfectionism is a risk factor for obsessive compulsive disorder, obsessive compulsive personality disorder, eating disorders, social anxiety, social phobia, body dysmorphic disorder, workaholism, self harm, substance abuse, and clinical depression as well as physical problems like chronic stress, and heart disease. In addition, studies have found that people with perfectionism have a higher mortality rate than those without perfectionism (Allen, 2003).

CAUSES OF PERFECTIONISM

Different scholars have different views as to what really are the causes of perfectionism. Leman (1998) listed the following as possible causes of perfectionism:

- Parental criticism
- Fear of failure
- Birth order effect- Studies had it that birth order plays a major role in causing perfectionism. First borns and only children were recorded to be the vulnerable group. Reason is because first borns grow up with adults as primary role models and he or she buys deeply into the whole concept of authority and the idea that authority figures are always right and must be obeyed to the very latter.
- Pessimistic attitude
- Parent personality- the personality type of parents can also be a motivating factor to perfectionism. If either parent or one of the parents is a type A personality type that is characterized with the tendency of perfectionism, the child will be train in that order.
- Peer pressure - "birds of a feather fly together". When a child has peers that are almost of the same behavior say perfectionism he/she will have no choice weather consciously or unconsciously to imbibe into the group identity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PERFECTIONISM FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Studies like (Grzegorek et al., 2004; Rice and Dellwo, 2002; Rice and Mirzadeh, 2000) expressed that perfectionism is a minus to human behavior. While the literature continues to primarily center on internal and external psychological and behavioral indicators of perfectionism, some researchers have also explored the role of peripheral influences such as parents and other external reinforcers. The following are the psychological implications of perfectionism:

Inferiority complex – most perfectionists set unrealistic targets. Now their inability to accomplish that leaves them with the feeling of guilt that gradually results into inferiority complex. Reason is that their motto is “the good is the enemy of bad”.

Procrastination – it is defined as deferment, postponement, stalling, delay, adjournment, putting off something that one has to do. The procrastinator has a real problem with time, schedules, and deadlines. A major reason behind the procrastination is the perfectionistic fear of failure (Parker, 2002). The perfectionist procrastinator has such high expectations he is afraid to start a project. He /she will rather stall and rush to get something done at the last minutes.

Pick out flaws in any situation – another defect of perfectionism is that it turns one into a faultfinder. Nothing seems perfect before them. Discouraged perfectionists go through life telling themselves the lie, “I only count when I’m perfect.” It becomes their life style.
Discouraged and depressed – because of the high expectations they have, and with the limited resources available, coupled with their personality, most times they end up not accomplishing their task. The result mostly is that they are depressed and discouraged for not accomplishing their goal.

Anxiety – perfectionism causes anxiety and whether anxiety is conscious or unconscious it has to come out somewhere. Certain parts of human body will pay the price (Brandy et al, 2013). That is why most of them wind up going to see doctors and the first symptoms they notice are migraines, stomach disorders, or back aches. They are the worriers of life, the ones who develop colitis, ulcers, facial tics, and cluster headaches (Leman, 1998).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the implications stated above, the reviewer suggests the following as the way out of this behavioral problem “perfectionism”.

I. Perfectionists constantly have to work at being open, tolerant, and patient with others and themselves.
II. Positive talk is a great tool for dealing with feelings of inadequacy and not being liked. Instead of dwelling on weaknesses, make a list of your strength and dwell on them.
III. Work on becoming an optimist. Think positive and always try to see things in a positive manner.
IV. Expect less of yourself. Perfectionists are famous for setting unrealistic expectations and for setting goals that are out of human reach.
V. Make a conscious effort to go easy on criticizing yourself and others.
VI. Parents too should be mild in criticizing their wards.
VII. Be assertive in your communication, using “I” instead of “you,” and confronting conflict proactively without trying to make everyone happy.
VIII. Decide on a period for a project and move on after the time has expired.
IX. Accept criticism by being human and acknowledging that mistakes are necessary for learning an

CONCLUSION

Most people would consider having high standards a good thing. Striving for excellence can show that one have a good work ethic and strength of character. High standards can also push one to reach his/her peak level of performance. Perfectionism, on the other hand, involves a tendency to set standards that are so high that they either cannot be met, or are only met with great difficulty. Perfectionists tend to believe that anything short of perfection is horrible, and that even minor imperfections will lead to catastrophe. The perfectionist constantly aspires to prove his worthiness through high achievement. Expectations are often unrealistic and overwhelming. Negative self-talk is regular and reinforces the behavior. The perfectionist is his own worst critic and can be self-deprecating. As a result, many perfectionists struggle with low self-esteem and feel that their achievements are “never good enough.” Fear and guilt are underlying emotions, motivators and perpetuators. The negative motivators and negative self-talk create a cycle of disappointment, anger, and depression. Work performance and productivity suffers from the perfectionist’s overly critical nature and fixation on eliminating all imperfect details. Perfectionists can also be overly defensive when criticized, making it difficult for them to learn and grow. Fear of failure and unwillingness to make mistakes often mean perfectionists will avoid taking on new and challenging tasks. Flawlessness is their only option. Perfectionists focus more on objects or tasks and less on people. Their fixation on right versus wrong, as opposed to the emotional impact of their decisions, causes the result to become more important than the process. Perfection is an unrealistic expectation and denies our humanity and fallibility.

REFERENCE


