

Role of Perfectionism at Workplace

Malikeh Beheshtifar

Management Department, Islamic AZAD University

Rafsanjan Branch, Iran

Tel: 09133430417

E-mail: M.beheshtifar@yahoo.com

Fateme Mazrae-Sefidi

Administration of Yazd Justice, Yazd, Iran

Mahmoud Nekoie.Moghadam

Management Department, Kerman University of Medical Sciences, Iran

Abstract

Perfectionism has been receiving attention in personality psychology for many years, but only a handful of studies have investigated the effects of perfectionism in normal workplace. Perfectionism is considered a stable pattern of thinking and behavior that changes relatively little over time. The distinction between positive and negative perfectionism is grounded in behavioral theory, where a similar behavior might be associated with different emotional responses depending on whether it is a function of positive or negative reinforcement. In the professional and corporate world, perfectionism is regularly thought of by managers and employees alike as a positive trait which enables an employee to strive toward a perfect performance/product. However, there is a “dark side” of perfectionism, typically explored in and attributed to clinical populations. The “dark side” could lead to behaviors typically associated with clinical disorders, such as depression, health problems and severe stress. Although, there is not yet a model of perfectionism in the workplace, the results will help to managers and human resource management practices.

Keywords: Perfectionism, positive perfectionism, negative perfectionism, organization

1. Introduction

The construct of perfectionism has been receiving attention in both clinical and personality psychology for many years, and recently the research literature on perfectionism has grown remarkably (Sumi & Kanda, 2002), but little is known about the role of perfectionism in work adjustment. Perfectionism has been conceptualized both as a stable personality trait, where individuals habitually engage in the same patterns of behavior and a thinking style, or the ways in which individuals think about those behaviors (Melrose, 2011). In the other hand, perfectionism is considered a stable pattern of thinking and behavior that changes relatively little over time, as opposed to a variable measure of a person’s state at any particular moment (Anshel, et al, 2009).

According to Burns (1983) perfectionism can be defined as a network of cognitions, including expectations and interpretations of events and evaluations of oneself and others, characterized by the setting of unrealistic standards, rigid and indiscriminate adherence to these, and the equating of self-

worth and performance (Haase & Prapavessis, 2004). Therefore, perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by striving for setting excessively high standards for performance accompanied by tendencies towards overly critical evaluations of one's behavior (Besharat, et al. 2010).

The perfectionist strives toward high goals, especially in the domains of work which may or may not be attainable for two reasons. First, the individual may have set unrealistic goals in regard to his or her abilities. Perhaps the goal is not attainable in the given time period. Second, perhaps the trade is not conducted fairly. The individual sets reasonable goals, but progress is thwarted by discrimination. Perfectionist tendencies are likely to be reinforced when the world appears just, and discouraged when the world appears to actively disregard hard work or appears random in handing out the benefits of achievement (Kraner, 2011).

Research on perfectionism over the past decade has focused on the tendency of some individuals to hold high personal standards (Kraner, 2011); meanwhile, there are big differences between perfectionists and those who are seen as healthy achievers (Anthony & Swinson, 1998). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate different forms of perfectionism briefly before study it at workplace.

2. Forms of Perfectionism

Some researchers have extended the view of perfectionism as a multidimensional construct. There are some viewpoints about perfectionism such as viewpoints of Maslow-1970 (struggle for perfection through self-actualization and use of one's potential, capabilities, & talents; absence of neurosis); Dabrowski-1972 (driving force that served to promote higher levels of development within the individual; tool for self-development, not a maladjustment); Adler-1973 (a striving to rise above feelings of despair and hopelessness); Hamacek-1978 (a combination of thoughts and behaviors associated with high standards or expectations for one's own performance); Burns-1980 (unidimensional manner, self-oriented, striving toward impossible goals, measure worth in terms of productivity and accomplishment); Brodsky-1984 (internalized fantasy); Lazarfeld-1991 (sound striving for perfection, realistic, useful attitude neurotic striving for perfection, withdrawal from reality); and Silverman- n.d. (abstract concept: driving force, inner knowing, desire to create meaning of one's life by doing the best one is capable of doing (Schuler, 2002).

The following section focuses on three main types of perfectionism:

1. Hewitt and Flett (1991) have identified three dimensions of trait perfectionism: Self-oriented perfectionism, Other-oriented perfectionism, and Socially Prescribed Perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism involves setting unrealistic, exacting self-standards, as well as stringently evaluating and censuring one's behavior. This dimension also entails a strong motivation to attain perfection and avoid failure (Fairlie & Flett, 2003). Self-oriented Perfectionism is the self-initiated requirement for one to be perfect (RHR International Company, 2007). Other-oriented perfectionism involves setting unrealistic standards for significant others, placing importance on the perfection of others, and stringently evaluating others' performance (Fairlie & Flett, 2003). Other-oriented Perfectionism is the requirement that others should be Perfect (RHR International Company, 2007). Individuals who are high in socially prescribed perfectionism perceive themselves to be the subjects of other people's perfectionist expectations. They believe that others evaluate them stringently and apply pressure on them to be perfect (Fairlie & Flett, 2003). Oneself to be perfect each of these behavior patterns carries its own risk for the individual and the organization (RHR International Company, 2007).
2. Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) offered a different multidimensional perspective of perfectionism. They identified six dimensions of perfectionism and also developed a Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale to tap the dimensions of high personal standards, concerns about meeting parental expectations, doubts about one's actions,

preference for organization and order, excessive concern about making mistakes, and parental criticism. According to Frost et al. (1990), perfectionists are often excessively self-critical as well. Many researchers have found associations between perfectionism and a number of problems, including anxiety, depression, procrastination, low self-esteem and poor adjustment (Castro & Rice, 2003).

3. Hamachek (1978) argued that perfectionism can be normal and that the striving associated with it may lead to positive adjustment. He described “normal perfectionism” as striving for realistic standards from which a sense of pleasure is derived when results are achieved and self-esteem is enhanced (Blackburn, 2003). In contrast, Hamachek also described “neurotic perfectionism”. This is when an individual strives for excessive and unrealistically high standards, and is overly critical and evaluative of their own behavior. They are motivated by a fear of failure and are unable to feel satisfaction if even the tiniest flaw occurs. They also experience uncertainty and anxiety about their own capabilities (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Hamachek distinguished between normal and neurotic perfectionism proposing that normal perfectionists enjoy their arduous pursuit of their goals while neurotic perfectionists continually strive for achievement of their unrealistic high standards without ever gaining a sense of satisfaction from their accomplishments (Tashman, 2005). Summarily, perfectionism has been described as a form of over conscientiousness or hyper conscientiousness (Flett & Hewitt, 2006). The characteristics of negative and positive perfectionism as a personal trait could investigate in any organization.

3. Positive and Negative Perfectionism at Workplace

Only a handful of studies have investigated the effects of perfectionism in normal working populations (Benson, 2003). There are positive as well as negative aspects of perfectionism, depending on how it is channeled (Silverman, 1999). The perfectionist or perfectionist organization can focus only on perfecting “the number” (Sears & Dorn, 2009). Usually, organizations in which are perfectionism, persistence and hard work are valued. Members feel they must avoid any mistake, keep track of everything, and work long hours to attain narrowly defined objectives (doing things perfectly) (Bulens, et al. 2002). But outcomes of perfectionism are various.

Positive (healthy) perfectionism is defined in terms of achieving positive consequences and the motivation to achieve a certain goal in order to obtain a favorable outcome. Negative (unhealthy) perfectionism is defined as a function of avoidance of negative consequences and the motivation to achieve a certain goal in order to avoid adverse consequences. This distinction between positive and negative perfectionism is grounded in behavioral theory, where a similar behavior might be associated with different emotional responses depending on whether it is a function of positive or negative reinforcement (Haase & Prapavessis, 2004).

A study showed that positive perfectionism was correlated with pride and negatively (with moderate correlations) with state shame and anxiety. Pride’s negative correlations with anxiety, hostility, shame-proneness, and negative perfectionism support the notion that it is an adaptive emotion. Negative perfectionism was significantly related to anxiety, state shame, and shame-proneness (Fedewa, et al., 2005). Another study showed that positive perfectionism found to be associated with higher academic achievement, higher achievement motivation, with positive personality factors, and the use of functional coping strategies. Negative perfectionism was generally found to be associated with negative personality factors and the use of dysfunctional coping strategies. It was not associated with academic achievement or achievement motivation (Ram, 2005). Also, healthy perfectionists were characterized by higher levels on organization, whereas unhealthy perfectionists scored higher on the parental expectations & criticism and concern over mistakes & doubts dimensions of perfectionism (Hawkins, et al, 2006).

A study in Iran by Niknam, Hosseinian and Yazdi (2010) showed that positive perfectionism is associated with higher advancement, self-esteem, and self-actualization, whereas negative perfectionism is associated with low self-esteem, depression and illogical beliefs.

Negative and positive perfectionisms were found to be positive and negative predictors, respectively, for depression and anxiety and conversely, negative and positive predictors for academic achievement, respectively (Roohafza, et al, 2010). According to Stoeber and Otto (2006), healthy perfectionists are those who work diligently towards a positive result but don't give oneself a hard time along the way or in the event of not achieving success. Healthy perfectionists have shown to have lower ego defenses, less procrastination, less obsessive compulsive symptoms, higher self-esteem and less depression than unhealthy perfectionists. Unhealthy perfectionists on the other hand, are those who have high levels of perfectionistic strivings and high levels of perfectionistic concerns. Studies of perfectionists that fit these criteria have shown evidence for attitudinal inflexibility, higher levels of stress, a tendency for persistent worry and fear of failure, slow decision making, and low interpersonal sensitivity (Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2010).

Both the positive and negative perfectionism items have some similarities, in that they tend to be intrinsically oriented and focus on internal rewards, processes and achievements. This is somewhat different from some of the other items that failed to load on either of the factors, where they focus more on outcomes (Haase & Prapavessis, 2004).

Outcomes of perfectionism can lead to stress, procrastination, avoidance, slow decision making, inflexibility, issues with interpersonal sensitivity, etc. Linking this to leadership, it is interesting to consider the leadership derailment literature, which outlines studies that have explored the behaviors that cause leaders to derail. Findings are consistent across 40 years of research into derailment factors. The most common causes of derailment are poor decision making, resisting change, and poor interpersonal skills. These types of behaviors described in the perfectionism research literature. The results show that the maladaptive leadership behaviors may be caused by maladaptive perfectionism (Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2010).

Some studies within organizations are showed that perfectionist standards are associated with reduced efficiency demonstrating the importance of considering invested time, errors, and response bias when investigating the relationship between perfectionism and performance (Stoeber & Eysenck, 2008). While, it should be noted that there are aspects of perfectionism that act to enhance performance such as having high standards and a need for order. The paradox that perfectionism helps performance in some ways, and hurts performance in others, often makes it hard for the perfectionist to change and for his or her boss to confront their over-controlling behavior. Because some aspects of perfectionism help the executive perform, there is often a feeling that any change will lead to less success (Hurley, R. & Ryman, 2003).

In addition, the combination of perfectionist traits and leadership responsibilities poses some interesting dynamics for the perfectionist as well as for those who work for them. It is important to note that in many cases, the perfectionist manager is completely unaware of both problem behaviors and their root causes. What's more, the in-depth case studies reveal that often their perception of the degree to which they are loosely or tightly controlling others is so inaccurate that they may actually think they are being empowering when they are in-fact over-controlling (Hurley, R. & Ryman, 2003).

Often what happens is that the perfectionist performs well until they get promoted to a bigger job that requires trust, empowerment, and other leadership behaviors that the person struggles to perform (Hurley & Ryman, 2003). Attaining a high standard and seeking to do well equate to success, whereas perfectionism costs time, energy and money. Perhaps it is not so much a case of being perfect as just doing a good job (McMahon & Rosen, 2008). A recent study also suggests that perfectionist managers are unlikely to make good leaders (McMahon & Rosen, 2008).

4. Discussion

Perfectionism is a personal standard, attitude, or philosophy that rejects anything less than perfect; and perfectionist is a person who demands perfection of himself/herself or others and is displeased with anything that is not perfect or does not meet extremely high standards. The variables that lead to each type of perfectionism are being discovered, and these may enhance understanding of which factors could be emphasized for healthy development or in clinical interventions. Positive and negative perfectionism have differential associations with achievement, motivation, personality variables, and coping strategies in organizations.

In the professional and corporate world, perfectionism is regularly thought of by recruiters, employers, managers, and employees alike as a positive trait which enables an employee to strive toward a perfect performance/product. However, there is a “dark side” of perfectionism, typically explored in and attributed to clinical populations. The “dark side” could lead to behaviors typically associated with clinical disorders, such as depression, health problems and severe stress. The “dark side” observed with clinical populations should be examined to determine if it applies to more normal populations, and specifically to the working professional (Bousman, 2007). Therefore, perfectionism is an energy that can be used either positively or negatively depending on one’s level of awareness (Silverman, 1999).

It is critical that the perfectionist manager understand that there is an inflection point where the negative aspects of perfectionism outweigh the positive aspects (Hurley, R. & Ryman, 2003). Also, it is difficult to foster a culture of creativity, personal responsibility and empowerment alongside perfectionist thinking. Managers can find perfectionists hard to manage, colleagues can find them difficult to work with, and subordinates can be at the mercy of a perfectionist manager (McMahon & Rosen, 2008). One of the hidden hazards of perfectionism is the tucking away of and attempts to avoid many things that make individual feel less than perfect.

The diagnosis of perfectionism often begins with the recognition that an executive is not succeeding or there are certain barriers to this person’s accelerated development. Whether it is identified through the use of an external consultant, internal intervention or a personal epiphany, there are ten action steps which can be used to modify behavior to produce a higher level of productivity:

1. Increased insight
2. Inventory of work activity
3. Re-focus on strategy
4. Set SMART goals
5. Experiment with standards for success
6. Celebrate wins
7. Confront the fear of failure
8. Learn to learn from mistakes
9. Learn to appreciate imperfection
10. Stress reduction (RHR International Company, 2007).

It is important to remember that no style is good or bad. All styles are valuable. The debated issues should be of interest to perfectionism researchers in general who do not yet have a model of perfectionism in the workplace, an environment that is impacted by much of the employees. The implications of this research are that perfectionism is not a unidimensional attribute as it is sometimes assumed to be. It is hoped that the results will inform human resource management practices such as personnel assessment and placement, job re-design, and employee assistance.

References

- 1] Anshel, M.H. Weatherby, N.L., Kang, M. & Wats, T. 2009. “Research calibration of a unidimensional perfectionism inventory for sport”. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. 10:210.

- 2] Anthony, M. & Swinson, R. 1998. "When perfect isn't good enough: strategies for coping with perfectionism". New Harbinger Publishing. USA.
- 3] Benson, E., 2003. "The many faces of perfectionism". *Monitor on Psychology*, 34: 18-20.
- 4] Besharata, M.A., Pourhoseina, R., Rostamia, R. & Bazzazianb, S., 2010. "Perfectionism and fatigue in multiple sclerosis". *Psychology and Health*. 1(14):2.
- 5] Blackburn, S.M. 2003. "The relationship between perfectionism, aversive self-awareness, negative affect and binge eating". University of Canterbury.
- 6] Bousman, L. 2007. "The fine line of perfectionism: is it a strength or a weakness in the workplace"?. University of Nebraska at Lincoln: 1-2.
- 7] Bulens, M., Krietner, R. & Kinicki, A. 2002. „Organizational behavior". Berkshire: McGraw Hill: 66.
- 8] Castro, J.R. & Rice, K.J. 2003. "Perfectionism and ethnicity: implications for depressive symptoms and self-reported academic achievement". *Cultural diversity and ethnic minority psychology*. 9(1): 65.
- 9] Ellam-Dyson, V. & Palmer, S. 2010. "Rational coaching with perfectionistic leaders to overcome avoidance of leadership responsibilities". *The coaching psychologist*. 6 (2): 6-7.
- 10] Fairlie, P. & Flett, G.L. 2003. "Perfectionism at work: impacts on burnout, job satisfaction, and depression". Poster presented at the 111th. Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, P.3.
- 11] Fedewa, B.A., Burns, L.R. & Gomez, A.A. 2005. "Positive and negative perfectionism and the shame/guilt distinction: adaptive and maladaptive characteristics". *Personality and individual differences*. 38: 1615-1616.
- 12] Flett, G.L. & Hewitt, P.L. 2002. "Perfectionism and maladjustment: an overview of theoretical, definitional and treatment issues". In GL Flett & PL Hewitt, (Eds.). *Perfectionism: Theory, Research and Treatment*: 5-31. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- 13] Flett, G.L. & Hewitt, P.L. 2006. "Positive versus negative perfectionism in psychopathology: a comment on Slade and Owens's dual process model". *Behavior modification*. 30(4): 472-495.
- 14] Haase, A.N. & Prapavessis, H. 2004."Assessing the factor structure and composition of the Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale in sport". *Personality and individual differences*. 36:1725-1737.
- 15] Hawkins, C.C., Watt, H.M. & Sinclair, K.E. 2006. "Psychometric properties of the Frost multidimensional perfectionism scale with Australian adolescent girls". *Educational and psychological measurement*. 66(6): 1001.
- 16] Hurley, R. & Ryman, J. 2003. "Making the transition from micromanager to leader". Fordham University, 113 West 60th Street, NY, NY 10023:2-9.
- 17] Kraner, A. 2011. "Perfectionism: differential relationships with the equity norm and belief in a Just world". Manchester College: 3-4.
- 18] McMahon, G. & Rosen, A. 2008. "Why perfectionism at work does not pay". *Coating Feature*: 61-63.
- 19] Melrose, S. 2011. "Perfectionism and depression: vulnerabilities nurses need to understand". *Nursing research and practice*. Article ID 858497, doi:10.1155/2011/858497: 2.
- 20] Niknam, M., Hosseinian, S. & Yazdi, S.M. 2010. "Relationship between perfectionism beliefs and self-handicapping behaviors in university students". *Journal of Behavioral Sciences*. 4(2): 104.
- 21] Ram, A. 2005. "The relationship of positive and negative perfectionism to academic achievement, achievement motivation, and well-being in tertiary students". University of Canterbury: P. 91.
- 22] RHR International Company. 2007. "The perils of perfectionism". 220 Gerry Drive, Wood Dale, Illinois 60191 USA, 630/766-7007.

- 23] Roohafza, H., Afshar, H., Sadeghi, M., Soleymani, B., Saadaty, A., Matinpour, M. & Asadollahi, G. 2010. "The relationship between perfectionism and academic achievement, depression and anxiety". *Iranian Journal of psychiatry and behavioral sciences*. 4(2):31.
- 24] Schuler, P.A. 2002. "Perfectionism: burden or blessing?". *Creative Insights*, Greenmeadow Park, 1654 Columbia Turnpike, Castleton-on-Hudson, NY 12033, 518-257-2018
- 25] Sears, R. & Dorn, J. 2009. "The fundamental law of risk evaluation. Commentary: a fundamental law of risks evaluation". *Jan./Feb editions of Contingencies*: 6.
- 26] Silverman, L.K. 1999. Perfectionism: the crucible of giftedness, *advanced development*. 8: 47-48.
- 27] Stoeber, J. & Eysenck, M.W. 2008. "Perfectionism and efficiency: accuracy, response bias, and invested time in proof-reading performance". *Journal of research in personality*. 42(6):2. 1673-1678.
- 28] Stoeber, J. & Otto, K. 2006. "Positive conceptions of perfectionism: approaches, evidence, challenges". *Personality and social psychology review*. 10: 295.
- 29] Sumi, K. & Kanda, K. 2002. "Relationship between neurotic perfectionism, depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms: a prospective study among Japanese men". *Personality and individual differences*. 32: 817.
- 30] Tashman, L.S. 2005. "The relationship between perfectionism and burnout in coaches". *Department of educational psychology and learning systems*. The Florida State University: ix, 11.