

## WHERE DOES PERFECTIONISM COME FROM? A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF PERFECTIONISTS AND NONPERFECTIONISTS

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Perfectionism is generally defined as the “striving for flawlessness” (Flett & Hewitt, 2002, p. 5), but researchers disagree about the developmental roots of perfectionism. It is likely that a perfectionistic orientation develops over time, and family history may contribute to the development of perfectionism. Early messages from teachers, coaches, peers, and the media regarding achievement and success may also influence whether or not one becomes a perfectionist. However, it remains unclear which specific experiences may lead one to become a perfectionist. A major purpose in this preliminary investigation was to examine the roots of achievement motivation in general and to clarify the developmental dynamics that surround an individual who becomes a self-proclaimed perfectionist.

Participants comprised 36 (16 male and 20 female) undergraduate students (65% Caucasian;  $M_{\text{age}} = 24.63$ ,  $SD = 7.52$ ) from a public university in North America. Through semistructured interviews, they answered a set of questions relating to their achievement motivation (e.g., “How important is achievement to you?”). Participants were also asked if they had any perfectionistic qualities or tendencies. Interviewees who answered yes to this question were then asked a series of questions specifically relating to the origins of their perfectionism (e.g., “Where do you think your perfectionistic tendencies come from?”). In this study, 23 participants (64%) identified themselves as perfectionists.

In terms of achievement motivation, perfectionists and nonperfectionists were similar in many areas of inquiry (e.g., believing in the need to work hard in order to succeed and feeling frustrated when unable to complete a task). Results from the interviews, however, indicate a few noteworthy differences between

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perfectionists and nonperfectionists. For example, although perfectionists and nonperfectionists did not give different ratings of the importance of achievement and success in their lives, perfectionists were more likely than nonperfectionists to say that they felt pressure from their families to succeed and that their parents were overly critical of their mistakes when they were growing up. Contrary to our predictions, however, perfectionists were no more likely to feel pressure from peers or teachers to succeed in life than were nonperfectionists. Sample responses from those describing themselves as perfectionists and nonperfectionists in response to the question “What messages did you get from your family about success and failure?” can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. *Responses from Perfectionists and Nonperfectionists about Success and Failure*

Self-descriptions	Perfectionists	Nonperfectionists
What messages from family about success/failure?	“You can always do better next time; you can try again”	“Achieving is important, but only if you are happy and do your best”
	“It is very important to them that I succeed”	“Try your hardest, but sometimes it is okay to fail; you can pick yourself up”
	“[If I fail], I would not say they were disappointed, but they know my potential and they expect high standards from me; they think I do not try hard enough”	“You can succeed if you try hard enough, but it is not worth killing yourself over”
	“They are not critical of me, because they think I am critical enough of myself already”	“They are just happy when I put the effort in”
	“If I fail, they call me a failure”	“If something goes wrong, try to make it better; but if you fail you are still supported”

Findings from this ongoing investigation may be useful to parents, teachers, counselors, and other professionals who work with perfectionistic individuals. Knowing where perfectionism comes from (as well as what specific socialization experiences might contribute to perfectionistic tendencies) will make it easier to design intervention strategies that encourage adaptive perfectionism in individuals and discourage (or at least help perfectionists manage) the more maladaptive aspects of perfectionism.

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## References

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