

Michael C. Pyryt
The University of Calgary

the giftedness/ perfectionism connection: recent research and implications

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss recent research regarding the linkage between perfectionism and intellectual giftedness.

The Construct of Perfectionism

One of the difficulties in describing the construct of perfectionism is recognizing the multiple uses that occur in the literature. There is a fine line between striving to reach high standards of excellence and feeling self-defeated through the inability to reach unreasonable expectations. Some writers, deal with this dichotomy by contrasting two types of perfectionism. Bransky, Jenkins-Friedman, and Murphy (1987) distinguish between enabling perfectionism that empowers individuals and disabling perfectionism that cripples individuals. Hamachek (1978) contrasts normal perfectionism marked by striving to attain a standard of excellence with neurotic perfectionism which is marked by fear of making mistakes. Enns and Cox (2002) label the positive aspects of perfectionism as "adaptive perfectionism" and the negative aspects of perfectionisms as "maladaptive perfectionism." Some writers (Parker, 2000;

Schuler, 2000) view the adaptive aspects as healthy perfectionism and the maladaptive aspects as unhealthy perfectionism. Other writers (Barrow & Moore, 1983; Burns, 1980; Greenspon, 2000; Pacht, 1984) use perfectionism to refer to the negative aspects of the syndrome.

Barrow and Moore (1983) prefer the term perfectionistic thinking to perfectionism. Perfectionistic thinking is viewed as a cognitive pattern that many people use at various times to varying degrees. The word perfectionism implies a trait that an individual either has or doesn't have. Barrow & Moore (1983) have identified common elements of perfectionistic thinking. Frequently, dichotomous (all-or-none) thinking is present. One's efforts are either perfect or worthless. Another element of perfectionistic thinking is viewing goals as necessities rather than outcomes worth striving for. Desires (Wants) are transformed into demands (Musts). Often, perfectionistic

thinking leads to focusing on unmet goals and challenges rather than savoring successes. Attention is placed on hurdles ahead rather than recognizing barriers cleared. Perfectionistic thinking leads to compulsiveness when less-than-perfect performance is attributed to permitting imperfections.

Clinicians have focused on the debilitating effects of perfectionism or perfectionistic thinking. Perfectionism has been identified as a possible cause of abdominal pain in children, alcoholism, anorexia, chronic olfactory paranoid syndromes, depression in children and adults, dysmorphophobia, erectile dysfunction, irritable bowel syndrome, Munchausen syndrome, obsessive compulsive personality disorders, Type A coronary-prone behavior, ulcerative colitis, and writer's block (Pacht, 1984).

Measurement of Perfectionism

Scales to measure perfectionism have evolved from viewing perfectionism as a unitary concept to envisioning perfectionism as a concept with several dimensions. There are currently two instruments, both called the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, that assess the multidimensional aspects of perfectionism. These scales were developed based on the responses of university students in the United States and Canada. Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) developed a 35-item instrument that assesses six dimensions of perfectionism (concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticism, doubts about action, and organization). Similar factor structures were obtained in three empirical studies (Enns & Cox, 2002). Hewitt and Flett (1991) developed a 45-item

instrument that assesses three dimensions related to perfectionism (Self-oriented Perfectionism that focuses on excessively high self standards; Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism that addresses perceptions of standards and expectations set by others; and Other-Oriented Perfectionism that examines an individual's expectations for others). Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, and Neubauer (1993) administered these two instruments, among others, to a large sample of undergraduates. They identified two factors (Maladaptive Evaluation Concerns and Positive Striving) that accounted for 67% of the variance on the two instruments. Perfectionism and Giftedness

Among educators of the gifted the link between giftedness and perfectionism is clearly established. The tendency toward perfectionism is an item on the most widely-used teacher rating scale for the identification of superior students (Renzulli, Smith, White, Callahan, & Hartman, 1976). Dealing with perfectionism among the gifted is often cited as one of the counseling needs of the gifted (Kerr, 1991; Silverman, 1993). Typically, educators concerned with gifted children are concerned about two negative impacts of perfectionism: underachievement and emotional turmoil. In terms of underachievement, Whitmore (1980) reported that perfectionistic tendencies make some gifted students vulnerable for underachievement because they do not submit work unless it is perfect. In terms of emotional stress, perfectionism is seen to cause feelings of worthlessness and depression when gifted individuals fail to live up to unrealistic expectations. DeLisle (1986, 1990) has provided anecdotal evidence that perfectionism places some gifted students at-risk for suicide.

Recent Research

Parker (2000, 2003) summarized a variety of studies that were conducted at the Center for Talented Youth at The Johns Hopkins University. Parker & Stumpf (1995) examined the concurrent validity and factor structure of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale for a sample of gifted seventh graders and found that the results for this sample were similar to the original findings of Frost et al. (1990). Parker & Mills (1996) compared 600 gifted sixth graders participating in an academic talent search with a control sample of 418 students from the same schools as talent search participants. Few differences were found between gifted samples and average-ability comparison groups. Gifted individuals tended to exhibit healthy perfectionism marked by high personal standards and organization. Although the correlations between parental level of perfectionism and a child's level of perfectionism were modest, mothers' perfectionism were related to their children's adoption of personal standards. Since the research described by Parker (2002, 2003) utilized students who participated in academic talent searches, it is possible that students who achieve in specific disciplines show healthy perfectionism whereas students who are gifted in other ways do not. There is enough evidence from case study research (Schuler, Ferbenzer, O'Leary, Popova, Delou, & Limont (2003) to suggest that some gifted students may be prone to perfectionism.

Coping with Perfectionism

Pyryt (2004) highlights the major lessons and attitudes that gifted students need to learn if they are to cope effectively with perfectionistic tendencies. Suggestions for helping parents and teachers instill these

attitudes in gifted students are provided.

1. Don't Take it Personally

From kindergarten upward, children tend to equate the evaluations that teachers make on their assignments as indicators of their self-worth. The grade of A is not simply an evaluation of the extent to which the student satisfied the criteria needed for the A, it represents an affirmation of the child's giftedness. A poor grade represents a disconfirmation of a child's giftedness. (For an unhealthy perfectionist, a grade of A-might be perceived as a poor grade). Each assignment, project, or test becomes another stressor that puts the self-concept at-risk. Some children procrastinate to avoid this threat to their self-worth. The work that is eventually submitted reflects a small commitment of their time. The subsequent evaluation of their work, even if negative, has little impact on their self-worth since the children can rationalize the poor evaluation with lack of effort. Parents can reinforce this equating of self-worth with achievement by spending time criticizing children for their mistakes rather than acknowledging their successes.

Students need to learn to separate their evaluation of self-worth from others' evaluation of their products. An assessment by a teacher of a child's book report, for example, is only an indication of the extent to which a child met the criteria that the teacher established for grading. Hopefully, the skills assessed reflect meaningful learning. A child who makes a 100 on the book report is no better as a person than a child who makes a 60.

The consistent use of rubrics is one way that teachers and parents can help children use evaluations as indicators of academic

skills rather than threats to their self-worth. By developing criteria for evaluating products and communicating the criteria to the students, teachers can help students focus on the extent to which their work meets the standards. Parents can also help by focusing on the criteria accomplished rather than harping on what criteria still needs improvement.

2. Know When to Quit

I just did an internet search using the term perfectionism and the Google search engine. There are 1, 350, 000 links to the term. If I explored the information in each link for only 10 minutes per link before attempting to write this paper, I might be ready to begin in twenty-six years. I need to be selective in my choice of possible sources. Gifted students need to know that whatever topic they pick for a project, they will find more potential references available than they can possibly manage to acquire and read in the time allotted. Teachers and parents can help gifted students develop skills in determining which available resources will be the most useful and accessible for them.

This simple example illustrates only one of the steps in completing a project. Perfectionistic students may need help finalizing closure at each step of the project. Data collection, for example, can be an endless process unless rules of thumb are provided such as 10 participants per variable to be analyzed for a quantitative study. Students doing qualitative research should be taught that a one-hour interview typically takes about five hours of transcription time by a professional. At \$20 per hour for transcription, each hour interview would cost \$100. The costs and time involved in data collection and analysis might easily exceed one's budget or time allotment.

Parents and teachers can help children become more effective in making progress towards program completion by routinely having discussions on the expectations for the project. A teacher who provides clear criteria regarding the number of references needed (both a minimum and maximum) provides a framework for organization. Parents can help children develop monitoring skills to check that their projects fall within the expected parameters.

3. Match the Time Commitment to the Value of Assignments

Perfectionistic students need to learn that if they want to earn the highest grades they should put the most effort into the assignments or components that count the most towards the grade. In my courses, I might give four 5-page essay assignments worth 10% each and one 20-page research paper worth 40% of the term grade. I hope that my students are spending four times the amount of their course effort on their research paper than on any one of the essay assignments. Perfectionistic students have a difficult time grasping this concept and often spend inordinate amounts of time on simple projects by greatly extending the scope of the project. Within any given project, the various components usually have unequal weightings. The use of peer feedback is one technique for generating input on the extent to which the most important components have been effectively addressed.

Set Goals and Focus on Improvement

The attainment of excellence usually occurs as a result of small incremental improvements over time rather than quantum leaps. It's helpful to set goals and work towards their attainment. The story of John Naber

provides an excellent example of the successful use of goal setting. In 1972, Naber watched Mark Spitz win seven gold medals, one of which was in the 100-meter backstroke, Naber's specialty. Naber committed himself to winning gold at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. Naber calculated that he would have to improve his time by four seconds to achieve this feat. Given the brevity of the 100-meter race, a four second improvement would be a remarkable achievement. Through goal setting, Naber realized that he had four years to achieve his goal, so needed to improve by only a second per year. Since Naber swam every day, he only needed to improve $1/365$ of a second per day; Since Naber swam twice a day, he only needed to improve $1/730$ of a second per workout. Naber dedicated himself to these incremental improvements in performance each day and stood on the podium as the gold medalist in the 100-meter backstroke in the 1976 Olympics.

Parents and teachers can help students generate goals, determine the steps needed to accomplish the goals, develop an action plan for achieving their goals, and monitor progress towards goal attainment. The acronym SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timeframe-provided) can be used to assist the goal-setting process.

Study the lives of eminent people

A 10 year-old perfectionistic student might win an international science fair and still be disappointed that the project is not the theory of relativity. The 10-year old student needs to know that Einstein didn't produce the theory of relativity at ten either. In fact at ten, Einstein's potential greatness was masked by poor school performance. It took Einstein twenty years to properly formulate

the equations for the theory of relativity.

Gifted students can learn many lessons from examining the lives of eminent people by reading biographies and autobiographies, or simply watching television shows such as Biography. One simple lesson to learn is that the path to success requires resiliency. Barriers such as rejection, illness, economic misfortunes, and relationship issues can make it difficult for an individual to achieve and maintain success. One of the key factors is being able to persist in the face of obstacles. The capacity to invest a great deal of effort is another requirement for success. Edison noted that Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. A third lesson is that refinement/revision is part of the process. Books that can be found in bookstores and libraries have undergone significant revisions and re-writing before publication. It's unrealistic to think that the first draft will be publishable in its original form. This message is being highlighted in many language arts classrooms that use writing assignments involving Planning for Writing, First Draft, Teacher and Peer-Editing, and Revision. A fourth lesson to be learned is that failure can be a constructive step in the process. Jonathan Salk's polio vaccine was not perfect in its original distillation. Medicines undergo a thorough process of experimentation and refinement before they are put on the market. Rather than viewing the limited effectiveness of a potential drug in a clinical trial as a cause for despair, the successful scientist will try another compound in hopes of success.

Parents and teachers might help students organize their biographical studies by examining the barriers (cultural, physical, economic, psychological, sociological) that eminent people faced and the strategies and qualities they used to overcome the barriers.

4. Enjoy the Journey

Some perfectionistic students are going to expect every aspect of their life to be perfect every day. This unrealistic expectation will inevitably lead to frustration when the unrealistic expectation remains unmet. Such frustration may lead to depression. The typical response is to seek counseling and perhaps treatment with drugs such as Prozac. An alternative is to take a different perspective. One can celebrate the fact that the individual has high standards and recognize that life is an existential struggle to reconcile the discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be." The key is to try to move forward each day to reduce the discrepancy. This alternative, known as the Dabrowskian perspective, is a helpful counseling approach for gifted individuals.

Perfectionists can also decrease enjoyment in life by focusing on unmet goals, things that still need to be accomplished rather than savoring accomplishments. An Olympic swimmer should be satisfied winning a gold medal and not be crushed if the time didn't merit a world record. Another swimmer who achieves a personal best should enjoy the accomplishment even if no medal is awarded.

Since the perfectionist's life can be very stressful, perfectionistic individuals need to find hobbies and activities that can bring joy. Whether it's jogging or Tai Chi, playing bridge or solitaire, watching symphonies or rock bands, the active engagement in such pursuits can be psychologically and physically rewarding.

Parents and teachers can help students identify and nurture their extra-curricular interests, which can serve as positive forces in their lifelong journeys.

References

- Barrow, J. C., & Moore, C. A. (1983). Group interventions with perfectionistic thinking. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, *61*, 612-615.
- Bransky, T., Jenkins-Friedman, R., & Murphy, D. (1987). Identifying and working with gifted students 'at risk' for disabling perfectionism. In R. Jenkins-Friedman & A. Robinson (Eds.), *Research briefs: A collection of research-based papers presented at the annual convention*, New Orleans, November, 1987 (pp. 14-16). Circle Pines, MN: National Association for Gifted Children.
- Burns, D. D. (1980, November). The perfectionist's script for self-defeat. *Psychology Today*, pp. 34-52.
- DeLisle, J. R. (1986). Death with honors: Suicide and the gifted adolescent. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *64*, 558-560.
- DeLisle, J. R. (1990). The gifted adolescent at risk: Strategies and resources for suicide prevention among gifted youth. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, *13*, 212-228.
- Enns, M. W., & Cox, B. J. (2002). The nature and critical assessment of perfectionism: A critical analysis. In G. L. Flett & P. L. Hewitt (Eds.). *Perfectionism: Theory, research, and treatment* (pp. 33-62). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Frost, R. O., Heimberg, R. G., Holt, C. S., Mattia, J. I., & Neubauer, A. L. (1993). A comparison of two measures of perfectionism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *14*, 119-126.
- Frost, R. O., Marten, P. A., Lahart, C., & Rosenblate, R. (1990). The dimensions of perfectionism. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, *14*, 449-468.
- Greenspon, T. S. (2000). "Healthy perfectionism" is an oxymoron! *Journal for Secondary Gifted Education*, *11*, 197-208.
- Hamachek, D. E. (1978). Psychodynamics of normal and neurotic perfectionism. *Psychology*, *15*, 27-33.

Hewitt, P. L., & Flett, G. L. (1991). Perfectionism in the self and social contexts: Conceptualization, assessment, and association with psychopathology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, 456-470.

Kerr, B. A. (1991). *A handbook for counseling the gifted and talented*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Pacht, A. R. (1984). Reflections on perfectionism. *American Psychologist*, *39*, 386-390.

Parker, W. (2000). Healthy perfectionism in the gifted. *Journal for Secondary Gifted Education*, *11*, 173-82.

Parker, W. D. (2002). Perfectionism and adjustment in gifted children. In G. L. Flett & P. L. Hewitt (Eds.). *Perfectionism: Theory, research, and treatment* (pp. 133-148). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Parker, W. D., & Mills, C. (1996). The incidence of perfectionism in gifted students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, *40*, 194-199.

Parker, W. D., & Stumpf, H. (1995). An examination of the Multidimensional

perfectionism Scale with a sample of academically talented children. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, *13*, 372-383.

Pyryt, M. C. (2004, June). Helping gifted students cope with perfectionism. *Parenting for High Potential*, pp. 10-14.

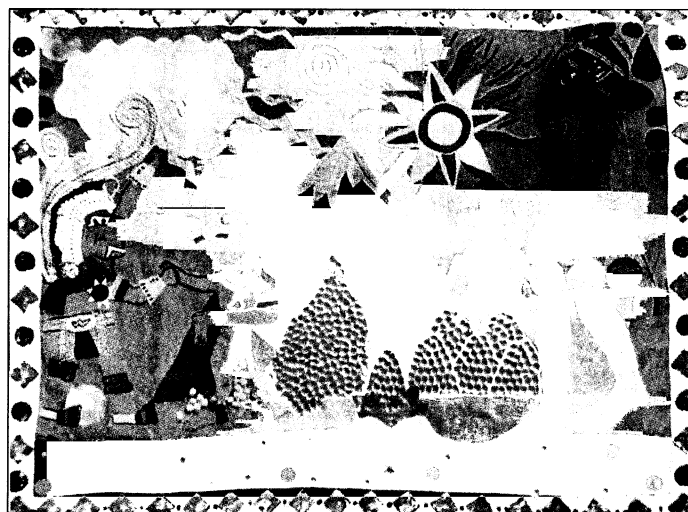
Renzulli, J. S., Smith, L. H., White, A. J., Callahan, C. M., & Hartman, R. K. (1976). *Scales for rating the behavioral characteristics of superior students*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.

Schuler, P. A. (2000). Perfectionism and gifted adolescents. *Journal for Secondary Gifted Education*, *11*, 183-196.

Schuler, P. A., Ferbenzer, I., O'Leary, N., Popova, L., Delou, C. M. C., & Limont, W. (2003). Perfectionism: International case studies. *Gifted and Talented International*, *18*, 67-75.

Silverman, L. K. (1993). A developmental model for counseling the gifted. In L. K. Silverman (Ed.), *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver: Love.

Whitmore, J. R. (1980). *Giftedness, conflict, and underachievement*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.



ROSEHILL SCHOOL, Group work, age 14-16
Voices and Visions, Worcestershire Education