The trap of academic success: perfectionism

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Now in 10th grade, Mary has always been one of the best students in her class, and has always found it easy to earn top grades. She is self-confident and knows she can do even better in school because of her previous record of success. She says to herself: “If I try a bit harder, I can improve still more. After all, I owe it to myself and my parents to make the most of my talents, right?” When she enters high school, she is surrounded by new classmates. Once again, her grades top the list. But then she begins to worry: “How can I keep this up? What if I get a bad grade? What would my classmates and teachers think? What would my parents and friends say? ‘She's failed! Maybe she was just a phony and didn’t really deserve her good grades all this time.’ And maybe they would be right. What will I think of myself then? How can I look myself in the mirror if I’m not perfect?”

Mary is a typical example of a high-achieving student whose outstanding performance in school has made her a perfectionist. But what does that mean? Perfectionists tend to have excessively high standards and to be overly critical of themselves if they fall short of those standards. Research shows that there are two types of perfectionism: personal standards perfectionism (characterized by self-imposed, excessively high standards of performance) and evaluative concerns perfectionism (characterized by concerns over making mistakes and fear of negative social evaluation). Both can coexist in one individual to different degrees, but they have different developmental trajectories and lead to different outcomes.

The first develops mainly through modeling (imitating a parent's perfectionism) and is related to both positive outcomes (e.g., high and healthy motivation, effort, and performance) and negative outcomes (e.g., anxiety and depressive symptoms). The second tends to develop through social expectations (parental pressure and control) and appears to be associated only with negative outcomes (e.g., low or unhealthy motivation, procrastination, avoidant behaviors, anxiety, and depressive symptoms – sometimes resulting even in suicide ideation).

To investigate how perfectionism develops, my collaborators and I conducted a three-wave longitudinal study with students aged 12 to 19. Cross-lagged analyses showed that over a total period of only nine months, high academic achievement predicted relative increases in both personal standards perfectionism and evaluative concerns perfectionism. A high level of academic efficacy (the belief that one is capable of learning or performing academic tasks at a certain level) predicted relative increases in personal standards perfectionism only. This is the first study to show that academic achievement is a common factor in the development of the two perfectionism dimensions, whereas academic efficacy differentiates the two.

“Perfectionism does not necessarily make students better at what they do.”

Why is this important? It has long been assumed that perfectionism leads to better performance. In this view, perfectionism has a bright side in that it drives students to perform better and better,
so it is worth the related costs. Our study questions this; indeed, it supports the idea that the causation runs in the opposite direction: High performance predicts increases in perfectionism. That is, perfectionism does not necessarily make students better at what they do (e.g., learning), but only makes them want more (personal standards perfectionism) and worry more (evaluative concerns perfectionism). And high performance is one of the reasons why this happens: Constant positive feedback seems to push students to strive for more and, as they realize that they are able to attain their high goals, they raise their standards still further.

But this does not come without costs. Students may come to perceive academic success as both a responsibility and a burden, believing that they need to maintain this perfect image that they and others around them have formed about them. Fearing that they might no longer live up to this image, they may become preoccupied with avoiding mistakes.

It should also be noted that in our study, personal standards perfectionism predicted increases in academic achievement only when academic efficacy was not included in the model. When we included academic efficacy, this effect disappeared. This means that the positive effects of perfectionism on performance that have been found in previous studies may have been, at least partially, the result of a third variable such as academic efficacy. That is, it is not students' perfectionistic standards that make them perform better, but their belief that they are capable of performing better that actually makes them better performers. We need more longitudinal studies to see if this is the case. If so, this might end the long-term debate as to whether perfectionism is both good and bad or just bad.

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Finally, it should be noted that research and practice generally point to the benefits of high academic success. It is thought to be, without qualification, a positive outcome. Our study challenges this assumption, however, showing that academic success may come with certain costs: striving for illusory perfection, fear of failing and of losing self-respect and the respect of others. What is essential is how students interpret their successes and failures. They need to learn how to deal with both. In other words, they need not only to achieve success, but also to learn what to do with it. This raises the question: Is academic success always good, or can it be both good and bad?

There are many students like Mary, top students who have become accustomed to consistently earning the best grades. They have also learned that people around them expect them to do so. Consequently, they have developed a perfectionistic way of thinking, believing that they must always strive for more, that others expect them to be perfect, and that it would be devastating if they ever failed. Students therefore need to learn not only how to achieve academic success, but also how to handle that success without falling into the trap of perfectionism.

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