Topical Series Abstracts: Perfectionism


Using the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, perfectionism scores were compared between a group of 600 students identified as academically talented and a group of 418 peers from the general cohort. In this nationally gathered sample, all students were sixth graders and of similar socioeconomic status. Findings indicated little difference between the mean scores of the two groups. Comparisons were also made between the gifted students and the general cohort using an empirical typology of perfectionism. This analysis did not indicate a statistically significant difference in the frequency of perfectionistic types between gifted students and the general cohort. These findings suggest that the frequent anecdotal reports of greater perfectionism among the gifted may be a product of differential labeling patterns of similar behaviors when demonstrated by gifted students and the general cohort, or may represent a relationship with socioeconomic level rather than intellectual level. A greater distinction between perfectionistic strivings which stimulate excellence and those perfectionistic strivings which frustrate and inhibit achievement needs to be made.


A nationally gathered sample of 820 academically talented 6th graders at the Center for Talented Youth of Johns Hopkins University took the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, and scores were cluster analyzed using both hierarchical and nonhierarchical cluster analysis with cross-validation. A 3-cluster solution was indicated. Students also took the Adjective Check List, the NEO-Five Factor Inventory, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Brief Symptom Inventory to determine characteristics of cluster membership. Results indicated that the cluster groups comprised a non-perfectionistic type (32.8%), a healthy perfectionistic type (41.7%), and a dysfunctional perfectionistic type (25.5%). Parent perceptions of the children were consistent with the students’ self-perceptions. The construct of perfectionism was primarily associated with conscientiousness and secondarily with agreeableness and neurosis.
Parents of academically talented students have been accused of pushing their children to attain high levels of achievement, as well as fostering performance anxiety and perfectionism in their children. Parents' achievement goals for their children, in terms of the focus on high performance or learning for understanding, were examined in relation to children's perfectionism. Parents (127 sets) and their sixth-grade academically talented children (56% boys) completed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale and parents reported their achievement goals for their children. Most parents reported learning goals, suggesting that emphasis on meeting external standards is not predominant among parents of talented students. Children of performance goal parents were significantly more likely to exhibit dysfunctional perfectionism than children of learning goal parents, reporting a combination of high concern about mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, and parental criticism. Parents' achievement goals can help predict which students might be at risk for adjustment problems and future underachievement.