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Parenting Perfectionism and Parental Adjustment

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Abstract

The parental role is expected to be one of the most gratifying and rewarding roles in life. As expectations of parenting become ever higher, the implications of parenting perfectionism for parental adjustment warrant investigation. Using longitudinal data from 182 couples, this study examined the associations between societal- and self-oriented parenting perfectionism and new mothers' and fathers' parenting self-efficacy, stress, and satisfaction. For mothers, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with lower parenting self-efficacy, but self-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with higher parenting satisfaction. For fathers, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with higher parenting stress, whereas higher levels of self-oriented parenting perfectionism were associated with higher parenting self-efficacy, lower parenting stress, and greater parenting satisfaction. These findings support the distinction between societal- and self-oriented perfectionism, extend research on perfectionism to interpersonal adjustment in the parenting domain, and provide the first evidence for the potential consequences of holding excessively high standards for parenting.

Keywords

perfectionism; parenting self-efficacy; parenting stress; parenting satisfaction

1. Introduction

The parental role is expected to be one of the most gratifying roles in life (Russell, 1974). Today, many adults, particularly those of higher socioeconomic status, are waiting longer to become parents, and are having fewer children (Musik, England, Edgington, & Kangas, 2009). These individuals have excess time and resources to devote to anticipating parenthood, which may contribute to the development of unrealistic expectations for parenting. Moreover, as children have decreased in economic value, parents have placed more emotional value on them, leading them to idealize the parental role (Eibach & Mock, 2011). Douglas and Michaels (2004) termed the current state of parenthood “New Momism,” or a romanticized but especially demanding view of parenting in which standards are excessively high and nearly impossible to meet. Thus, “parenting perfectionism” may be an emerging cultural phenomenon.

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However, despite abundant research on perfectionism, few studies have examined perfectionism in the context of particular social roles or relationships. Moreover, although the construct of “parenting perfectionism,” or the degree to which one holds excessively high standards for parenting, was introduced by Snell, Overbey, and Brewer (2005), no known study has examined the implications of parenting perfectionism for parental adjustment. Given that poor adjustment to parenthood has been linked to maladaptive child and family outcomes (Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Kazdin & Whitley, 2003; Simons, Beaman, Conger, & Chao, 1993), it is critical to understand the implications of excessively high standards for parental adjustment. This study examined associations between parenting perfectionism and three aspects of parental adjustment: parenting self-efficacy, parenting stress, and perceived satisfaction with the parenting role. We focused on the adjustment of mothers and fathers immediately following the birth of a first child, as the first weeks of parenthood involve challenging adjustments (Russell, 1974), and may be especially difficult for perfectionists.

Perfectionism is the degree to which an individual strives to reach excessively high standards (Hamachek, 1978). Hamachek was among the first to suggest an adaptive nature to perfectionism, positing that perfectionism could emerge as normal or neurotic. Perfectionism can also be described as societal-oriented, or focused on society’s expectations for an individual, or self-oriented, focusing on an individual’s own expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Societal-oriented perfectionism has been consistently associated with negative outcomes such as depression and reduced self-esteem (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & O’Brien, 1991), whereas self-oriented perfectionists may have high motivation but may also ruminate over failures and suffer from high anxiety (Randles, Flett, Nash, McGregor, & Hewitt, 2010).

Because perfectionism is primarily goal-oriented (Hamachek, 1978) it is ideal to study in domains where successes or failures are easily informed. Perfectionists often utilize dichotomous thinking by interpreting their actions as complete successes or failures (Egan, Piek, Dyck, & Rees, 2007); yet, research has largely overlooked how perfectionism operates in socially dominated areas of life when successes and failures are more subjective. Because relationships cannot be easily controlled, perfectionists may find them frustrating (Hill, Zrull, & Turlington, 1997). One relationship domain in which perfectionism may prove particularly challenging is parenting.

Parenting self-efficacy, or the belief that an individual can successfully complete parenting tasks (Coleman & Karraker, 1997), is one form of parental adjustment that may be affected by parenting perfectionism. According to Bandura (1977), the strongest influences on self-efficacy are previous successes and failures. Given the role of dichotomous thinking in perfectionism (Egan et al., 2007), which biases perfectionists to view their efforts as complete failures or successes, individuals with excessively high standards may rarely reach their unrealistic goals. This incongruence between excessively high standards and reality may damage parenting self-efficacy. Moreover, it is possible that these discrepancies between intended parenting goals and reality may also increase stress related to parenting and reduce satisfaction with the parenting role (Mercer, 1986). Parents with low parenting self-efficacy, high parenting stress, and low parenting satisfaction consistently show lower quality parenting and their children exhibit more behavior problems (Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Kazdin & Whitley, 2003; Simons et al., 1993).

This study examined associations between societal- and self-oriented parenting perfectionism and the parenting self-efficacy, parenting stress, and parenting satisfaction of new mothers and fathers. Consistent with perfectionism research (Stoeber & Otto, 2006), we hypothesized that individuals with high levels of societal-oriented parenting perfectionism

would have lower levels of parenting self-efficacy, higher parenting stress, and less satisfaction with parenting. Because interpersonal domains like parenting may be particularly challenging for perfectionists (Hill et al., 1997), we hypothesized that individuals high on self-oriented perfectionism would also report low parenting self-efficacy, higher levels of parenting stress, and less parenting satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Data were drawn from a longitudinal study of 182 married or cohabiting dual-earner couples who became parents for the first time between 2008 and 2010. Participants were recruited through childbirth education classes, newspaper ads, movie ads, and snowball sampling in a large Midwestern U.S. city. Majorities of the sample were White (85%), married (86%), and college educated (70%), and the median household income was \$81,000/year.

Data were collected at four time points: the third trimester of pregnancy and 3, 6, and 9 months postpartum. For the purposes of this study, we used the data on parenting perfectionism provided by expectant parents via survey during the third trimester, and data on initial parental adjustment provided by new parents via self-report at 3 months postpartum.

2.2. Measures

Expectant parents' parenting perfectionism was measured using a shortened 12-item version of the Multidimensional Parenting Perfectionism Questionnaire (MPPQ; Snell et al., 2005). Modeled after Hewitt and Flett's (1991) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, the MPPQ was the first scale specifically designed to measure parenting perfectionism, and allowed for the examination of associations between societal- and self-oriented parenting perfectionism and parental adjustment. It included 4 items from each of the two original 6-item dimensions that were the focus of this study: societal-oriented parenting perfectionism (i.e., "Only if I am a 'perfect' parent will society consider me to be a good parent"; $\alpha = .82$ for mothers and .69 for fathers) and self-oriented parenting perfectionism (i.e., "I set very high standards for myself as a parent"; $\alpha = .81$ for mothers and .74 for fathers). Responses to these items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all characteristic of me*; 5 = *very characteristic of me*).

New parents completed three measures of parental adjustment including the 10-item Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale (Teti & Gelfand, 1991), with items such as "When your baby is upset, fussy or crying, how good are you at soothing him or her?" (1 = *not good at all*; 4 = *very good*; $\alpha = .78$ for mothers and .84 for fathers). The five items measuring parenting stress (i.e., "Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be"; 1 = *strongly disagree*; 4 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .71$ for mothers and .67 for fathers) were drawn from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (Abidin, 1995; Filippone & Knab, 2005). Parents also completed the Motherhood/Fatherhood Satisfaction/Meaning Scale (Pistrang, 1984), which consisted of 24 items such as "My baby makes me feel useful" (1 = *never* and 5 = *very often*; $\alpha = .92$ and .93 for mothers and fathers, respectively).

Prior to their child's birth, expectant parents also completed the NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1992) to assess Neuroticism and Conscientiousness, which were controlled for in analyses due to their associations with perfectionism (Enns, Cox, Sareen, & Freeman, 2001).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and results of paired-samples *t*-tests are presented in Table 1. Fathers were significantly higher on self-oriented parenting perfectionism than mothers, whereas mothers reported greater parenting self-efficacy and satisfaction with the parenting role than fathers. A trend ($p = .06$) suggested that mothers were higher on societal-oriented parenting perfectionism than fathers.

Next, correlations and partial correlations were performed (Table 2). Partial correlations controlled for Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and the other dimension of parenting perfectionism, because it is important to account for overlap between dimensions of perfectionism when trying to disentangle their effects (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Partial correlations revealed that for mothers, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with lower parenting self-efficacy, whereas self-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with more satisfaction with parenting. For fathers, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was associated with higher parenting stress. Self-oriented parenting perfectionism was significantly related to all three measures of parental adjustment for fathers. Fathers high on this dimension reported higher parenting self-efficacy, lower parenting stress, and more parenting satisfaction.

4. Discussion

As expectations of parenting become ever higher (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Eibach & Mock, 2011) the implications of some parents' excessively high standards for their adjustment to parenthood cannot be ignored. Our results support the distinction between societal- and self-oriented perfectionism. Whereas societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was linked to poorer parental adjustment, as we had anticipated, self-oriented parenting perfectionism was linked to better parental adjustment, especially for new fathers, contrary to our expectations. No prior study had examined perfectionism specific to the domain of parenting and its associations with parenting self-efficacy, parenting stress, and parenting satisfaction, which are critical aspects of parental adjustment (Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Kazdin & Whitley, 2003; Simons et al., 1993).

Given the negative implications of societal-oriented parenting perfectionism for both new mothers and fathers, future research should consider whether this dimension of perfectionism is also related to broader aspects of postpartum adjustment, such as postpartum depression, anxiety, and well-being (Flett, Hewitt, & Besser, 2010). Interestingly, our findings suggest that self-oriented parenting perfectionism was most consistently positively associated with parental adjustment for new fathers. The literature on fathers' adjustment to parenthood is relatively sparse when compared to that on mothers (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010), although as fathers have become more involved in childrearing, interest in them has increased (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Our results suggest that self-oriented parenting perfectionism may be particularly adaptive for new fathers.

That self-oriented parenting perfectionism was linked to better parental adjustment may seem surprising in light of the liabilities associated with this type of perfectionism (Randles et al., 2010). However, researchers have posited that the negative outcomes that result from perfectionistic strivings originate not only from perceived failures, but also from the way individuals cope with perceived failures (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008). The consequences of the high personal standards characteristic of self-oriented parenting perfectionists may depend on other factors such as the extent to which perceived failures are accompanied by high levels of self-criticism (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2008). Thus,

further research including other aspects of perfectionism would be useful for elucidating the conditions under which self-oriented parenting perfectionism is adaptive versus maladaptive. Other aspects of perfectionism that may be useful to examine in future work include rumination as well as perceived discrepancy between intended goals and reality in order to better understand how individuals with high standards for parenting interpret their successes and failures. In addition, additional studies should consider the role of parenting perfectionism in parental adjustment in the context of other important predictors (e.g., personality, social support).

Limitations of this study must also be noted. Although parenting perfectionism was measured prior to the child's birth, it remains possible that unmeasured aspects of prenatal expectations regarding parental adjustment affected the setting of perfectionistic standards. Future research should measure parenting perfectionism at multiple time points to better establish the direction of effects. Moreover, because of the method of sampling, the results may not be generalizable to the larger population of new parents. However, the relatively high socioeconomic status of our sample may have potentiated especially high expectations for the parental role, making this sample ideal for the first examination of associations between parenting perfectionism and parental adjustment.

5. Conclusion

Our research has shed light on the potential consequences for new parents' adjustment to parenthood of the emerging cultural phenomenon of parenting perfectionism. Although self-oriented parenting perfectionism appeared to be adaptive, especially for fathers, societal-oriented parenting perfectionism was linked to poorer parental adjustment for both mothers and fathers. Further attention to perfectionism in interpersonal domains such as parenting is needed in order to more fully understand the benefits as well as the drawbacks of perfectionistic strivings for individuals and their families.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Mothers			Fathers			Paired-samples <i>t</i> -test	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Societal-Oriented Parenting Perfectionism	177	2.42	.90	172	2.28	.75	<i>t</i> (169) = 1.92	.15
Self-Oriented Parenting Perfectionism	180	3.23	.87	175	3.36	.84	<i>t</i> (174) = -2.05*	.15
Parenting Self-Efficacy	174	3.45	.31	175	3.12	.41	<i>t</i> (170) = 8.96**	.69
Parenting Stress	174	2.05	.54	172	2.01	.51	<i>t</i> (171) = -1.02	.08
Parenting Satisfaction	174	3.93	.54	169	3.60	.59	<i>t</i> (168) = 5.59**	.43

Note. *N*s vary due to missing data. Three couples dropped from the study between the third trimester and 3 months postpartum.

* *p* < .05

** *p* < .01

Table 2

Correlations of Parenting Perfectionism and Parental Adjustment

Mother's Parental Adjustment			
Mother's Parenting Perfectionism	Self-Efficacy	Stress	Satisfaction
Societal-oriented	-.21** (-.15*)	.10 (-.02)	.01 (-.13)
Self-oriented	.15* (.08)	.10 (.04)	.15* (.20*)
Father's Parental Adjustment			
Father's Parenting Perfectionism	Self-Efficacy	Stress	Satisfaction
Societal-oriented	-.04 (-.03)	.18* (.18*)	.18* (.05)
Self-oriented	.12 (.16*)	-.04 (-.17*)	.21** (.16*)

Note. Values in parentheses are partial correlations controlling for Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and the other dimension of perfectionism.

*
 $p < .05$

**
 $p < .01$