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PARENTAL INFLUENCES ON SOCIAL ANXIETY: THE SOURCES OF PERFECTIONISM

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Hamachek (1978) held that positive perfectionists “strive for high standards resulting in feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction,” whereas neurotic perfectionists “strive for high standards but, no matter the result, never seem to do things good enough” (p. 28). What determines the type of perfectionism a person falls under? Studies reveal that a major influence may be the individual’s parents. Children face many obstacles growing up. Parents sometimes add to these difficulties by expecting more from their children than is possible for a growing yet still immature being. These expectations, and the parental criticism directed at any failure to meet them, can lead children to rebel. Occasionally, however, a child will continue to strive for excellence, and some will continue to fall short in the eyes of their parents. These are the individuals who become neurotic perfectionists. Blatt (1995) describes maladaptive perfectionists as “constantly trying to prove themselves...always on trial, and feel[ing] vulnerable to any possible implication of failure or criticism” (p. 119). These individuals are observed as having strong feelings of inferiority (Ashby and Kottman 1996) and lower scores on measures of general and social self-efficacy; constantly seeking approval and desperately trying to avoid errors and failure (Blatt 1995); evaluating their performance based on comparisons with others; and viewing others as being in control of them (Ashby 1998). Such feelings of inferiority go on to affect other parts of their lives, hence connecting neurotic perfectionism with a plethora of other psychological disorders, social anxiety being one of the most widespread. Fear of failing in front of others, often at even minor tasks, may be even more difficult than failing itself. The more perfectionistic an individual’s standards, or perceptions of the standards...
of others, the more likely it is that a negative evaluation will appear, producing social fears and phobias (Sabourou, Lundh, and Öst 1998).

Despite the many findings that support possible relations between maladaptive perfectionism, social phobia, parental expectations, and parental criticism, research to date has not assessed the relations among these elements collectively.

We designed our study to assess connections among all the above variables, posing two hypotheses: (1) elevated degrees of neurotic perfectionism are correlated with high parental expectations and/or levels of criticism; (2) there is a direct link between neurotic perfectionism and high levels of social anxiety. Additionally, we hypothesized that women would suffer from perfectionism and/or social anxiety at a higher rate than men. Because of the role differences in our society, females have been said to be more prone than males to developing neurotic perfectionism. Many women may be especially vulnerable to the "imposter syndrome." Bell (2001) describes this attitude as affecting many high-achieving women, manifesting as the "doubting and discrediting of one's abilities and achievements" (p. 366).

Method

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Frost et al. 1990) and the Social Phobia and Anxiety Inventory (SPAI; Turner, Beidel, and Constance 1996) were administered to 420 college students at Miami University (289 females, 131 males; age range 18–22). Subjects were enrolled in an introductory psychology course and received research credits for their participation. The MPS consists of six scales, two of which—the Parental Expectations and Parental Criticism subscales—were conceptually relevant to the project. The MPS also provided overall neurotic perfectionism scores, while the SPAI generated overall social anxiety scores. Simple correlational and multiple regression analyses were then applied to these data. Separate analyses were performed to determine any significant gender differences. In addition, subjects were divided into two groups: those scoring high on the SPAI (the High Group) and those scoring low on this measure (the Low Group). The means of these two groups on all variables were compared using t tests.

Results

Significant correlations were found between Parental Expectations and Parental Criticism (r = .641, p ≤ .05), Parental Expectations and
Neurotic Perfectionism ($r = .700, p \leq .05$), and Parental Criticism and Neurotic Perfectionism ($r = .684, p \leq .05$).

A significant correlation between Social Anxiety and Neurotic Perfectionism was also found ($r = .473, p \leq .05$). Regression analysis revealed that level of Neurotic Perfectionism was a good predictor of Social Anxiety level ($\beta = .433, t = 7.777, p \leq .05$). The variables execute a linear effect (Table 1). $T$ tests for the High SPAI Group compared to those of the Low Group revealed that, on average, those who scored higher on the SPAI also scored significantly higher on the MPS and the Parental Criticism subscale. Examination of demographic variables reveals that age made a difference: the younger the subjects, the stronger their perception of high parental expectations. Finally, no findings supported the hypothesis that women suffer from perfectionism at a higher rate than men.

**Table 1. Coefficients for the Regression Analysis of Perfectionism and Social Anxiety**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Unstandardized Coefficients</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>Standard Error</td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>$t$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (Constant)</td>
<td>45.837</td>
<td>4.673</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.809</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perfectionism Total</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.473</td>
<td>7.777</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a. Dependent Variable: Social Anxiety*

**Discussion**

Parental Expectations and Parental Criticism have powerful effects on children in determining later development of psychological disorders such as Neurotic Perfectionism and Social Anxiety. High Parental Expectations and Parental Criticism were found to be highly correlated with Neurotic Perfectionism in college students. Neurotic Perfectionism, in turn, was not only correlated with high levels of Social Anxiety, but in fact proved a good predictor of it in those already known to be Neurotic Perfectionists. No difference in gender for the above psychological disorders was detected. We may speculate on this finding as follows: Our participants were mostly freshmen. Freshman year of college is a time when students face many challenges and expectations; fears of failure and social rejection top the list of anxiety instigators. It is a time when boys and girls are facing many of the same
pressures. If we had conducted the experiment with high school or college seniors, the results may have indicated gender differences. In addition, social desirability is often an important confounding variable. Many students, though told their responses are confidential, answer in a socially acceptable way.

Relations between age and perception of high Parental Expectations suggest that college students perceive their parents’ expectations as higher early in their college career.

This study further supports the notion that Perfectionism and Social Anxiety may originate in relationships a student experienced earlier with his or her parents, whose exceedingly high expectations and harmful criticisms must have had a negative effect on personality development. Psychoanalytic therapists may find this study especially useful, since much of their work is directed toward freeing patients from the early “voices” of their parents.

REFERENCES


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