



Insecure attachment, perfectionistic self-presentation, and social disconnection in adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to investigate several components of the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model (PSDM) by assessing the relationships among perfectionism, insecure attachment, and social disconnection in adolescents. This study examined perfectionistic self-presentation, attachment style, and experience of disconnection from social environment in a sample of 178 adolescents. Results indicated that perfectionistic self-presentation facets were significantly correlated with social disconnection and fearful attachment was associated with the nondisclosure of imperfection. Moreover, nondisclosure of imperfection partially mediated the relationship between fearful attachment and social disconnection. The current study is the first to examine the link between insecure attachment and perfectionistic self-presentation and provides some evidence supporting the PSDM.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Perfectionism and psychopathology

Over the past two decades, investigators have shown considerable interest in the relationship between perfectionism and psychopathology. A large body of research has linked perfectionism to numerous adjustment problems in children, adolescents and adults (e.g. see Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, in preparation). Perfectionism is often conceptualized as a multidimensional construct (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and according to Hewitt and Flett (1991), trait perfectionism entails three dimensions: self-oriented, other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). *Self-oriented perfectionism* is an intrapersonal trait dimension that involves the requirement for one's own perfection, all-or-nothing thinking, and emphasis of one's own flaws. In contrast, *other-oriented perfectionism* involves the extent to which one possesses high expectations and standards for others. *Socially prescribed perfectionism* is an interpersonal dimension that involves the perception that others have unrealistic expectations for one's behavior.

In addition to these perfectionism traits, Hewitt and colleagues (2003) also described perfectionistic individuals' need to appear perfect to others by promoting their perfection or by not displaying or disclosing imperfections, termed the perfectionistic self-presentation. Perfectionism traits and perfectionistic self-presentation facets are associated differentially with various types of psychopathology and maladjustment (see Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Hewitt et al., 2003). Perfectionistic self-presentation facets have been shown to relate to poor relationship functioning and various forms of psychopathology above and beyond trait perfectionism and other personality variables in adults and adolescents (Hewitt et al., 2003; Roxborough et al., in press). The focus of the current work is on the interpersonal expression of perfectionism among adolescents.

1.2. Perfectionistic self-presentation in adolescents

Perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP), the interpersonal expression of perfectionism, involves the need to appear perfect with three dimensions: *perfectionistic self-promotion* (the need to actively promote one's supposed "perfection"), *nondisplay of imperfection* (the need to avoid revealing one's perceived imperfections), and *nondisclosure of imperfection* (the need to avoid disclosing one's imperfections; Hewitt et al., 2003). Recently, Hewitt et al. (2011) have replicated all three facets of the PSP in adolescents. All three PSP facets have been associated with psychological difficulties and distress, including anxiety and relationship difficulties, depression, hopelessness and suicidal risk in clinical and nonclinical samples of adolescents (e.g. Hewitt et al., 2011; Roxborough et al., in press).

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Although there is evidence that PSP in adolescents is associated with a variety of deleterious outcomes, there has been little research on mechanisms that explain the association. Recently, Hewitt and colleagues have described a model of perfectionism and maladjustment that focuses specifically on interpersonal components of perfectionism known as the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model (PSDM; Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, & Caelian, 2006). The current study represents a preliminary exploration of the PSDM in adolescents.

1.3. The Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model

The PSDM asserts that interpersonal dimensions of perfectionism (i.e. the PSP facets and socially prescribed perfectionism) develop as a result of inordinate and thwarted needs to feel connected or a sense of belonging. A response to this need for interpersonal acceptance involves the development of perfectionism such that individuals come to learn that if he/she is perfect or appears to others as perfect, others will accept and care for them. However, perfectionistic behaviors actually generate further disconnection from the social environment by fostering problematic or distant interpersonal relationships (Hewitt et al., 2006). According to the PSDM, perfectionism engenders psychological maladjustment through the experience of both subjective (i.e. a felt sense of detachment from others) and objective (i.e. impoverished relationships with others) social disconnection (Hewitt et al., 2006). Therefore, it is proposed that PSP exerts deleterious influences on interpersonal behavior, which, in turn, create a sense of disconnectedness and perceived lack of social support.

Few studies have investigated the link between perfectionistic self-presentation style and social disconnection in adolescents. However, in a recent study of 152 psychiatric outpatient adolescents, Roxborough et al. (in press) demonstrated that nondisplay of imperfection was associated with a sense of disconnection, which was correlated with an increase in the overall suicidal risk among adolescents. In addition, Sherry, Law, Hewitt, Flett, and Besser (2008) found that perceived social support mediated the relationship between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression among university students. Taken together, these studies offer initial support for the PSDM.

Other recent studies have examined the role of perfectionism on intra- and interpersonal functioning in adolescents. For instance, Gilman, Adams, and Nounopoulos (2011) have found that perfectionistic adolescents had more disruptive and less prosocial relationships than nonperfectionistic adolescents. Furthermore, Ye, Rice, and Storch (2008) found that perfectionistic belief accounted for significance variance in interpersonal difficulties and depressive symptoms for adolescents diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), even after controlling for OCD symptoms. Together, these studies suggest that perfectionistic adolescents are more vulnerable to interpersonal difficulties that place them at higher risk for maladjustment.

1.4. Attachment style, perfectionistic self-presentation, and social disconnection

From a theoretical standpoint, early relationships with parents and family histories may be pivotal in producing perfectionism. Several authors (Blatt, 1995; Burns, 1980; Flett, Hewitt, Oliver, & MacDonald, 2002; Hamachek, 1978; Horney, 1950) have suggested that certain perceived parental practices (e.g. neglect, love withdrawal, intrusive parenting, and shaming) may be important precursors of perfectionism in children. Despite the numerous theoretical accounts of its origin, no studies have investigated the origin and development of PSP. This underscores the need for a conceptual framework linking the various psychological factors

and processes associated with PSP. We believe that the adult attachment theory offers such a conceptual framework from which the relationship between perfectionistic self-presentation and social disconnection can be further investigated.

Adult attachment theory is concerned primarily with the nature of relationship bonds and their effects on human development across the lifespan (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby (1988) proposed that the quality of caregiver-child relationships results in internal representations or “working models” of the self and others that provide the prototypes for later interpersonal relationships. Subsequently, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) created a four-category classification of attachment based on Bowlby’s definition of internal working models: *secure*, *preoccupied*, *fearful* and *dismissing*. According to their conceptualization, individuals with *secure* attachment have positive expectations of self and others and report better overall mental and physical well-being. Individuals with *preoccupied* attachment have a deep-seated sense of unworthiness and are highly dependent on others for validation of self-worth. *Fearful* individuals are also highly dependent on others for approval. However, they perceive others as untrustworthy and undependable, and they shun intimacy and disclosure to avoid the pain of potential criticism or rejection. Finally, *dismissing* individuals avoid interpersonal closeness due to their negative views of others. Extensive research has explored the connections between attachment style and affective, cognitive and psychological indicators of adjustment (see Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Flett and colleagues (2002) hypothesized that a poor parent-child relationship produces a chronic sense of disconnection, hopelessness, and self-doubt. To cope with feelings of vulnerability and inferiority, the insecurely attached child may develop an excessive need to appear perfect, to hide imperfections or avoid disclosing flaws and failures. Hence, consistent with the PSDM, children with high attachment insecurity may develop a perfectionistic self-presentation style and, subsequently, experience significant social disconnection. The hypothesis proposed by Flett and colleagues (2002) is also predicated on Mikulincer’s (1995) observation that certain insecurely attached people will become avoidant and isolated from others because “. . . their self-esteem is so low and fragile that they cannot tolerate discovery of the slightest flaw. This idealization of the self seems to be a defense against the experience of rejection by others on the recognition of one’s imperfections” (p. 1213). Consistent with the hypothesis proposed by Flett and colleagues (2002), Hewitt and colleagues (2011) demonstrated that PSP facets in adolescents are linked with an inordinate need for approval, fear of negative evaluation, and excessive self-consciousness offering further support for our contention that PSP may be motivated by fears of failure and rejection.

To our knowledge, no research to date has examined the relationships between attachment style, perfectionistic self-presentation, and the experience of social disconnection among adolescents; however, trait perfectionism has been linked with insecure attachment (Cox, Enns, & Clara, 2002; Rice & Mirzadeh, 2000; Wei, Heppner, Russell, & Young, 2006; Wei, Mallinckrodt, Russell, & Abraham, 2004). Furthermore, it has been shown that trait perfectionism mediates the relationship between insecure attachment and depressive symptoms in adults (e.g. Wei et al., 2004, 2006).

1.5. Hypotheses and goals

The current research had several goals. First, previous research has focused exclusively on adult populations, using either perfectionism traits (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) or perfectionistic attitudes (FMPS; Frost et al., 1990). No study has examined the associations among insecure attachment, PSP, and social disconnection in an

adolescent sample. The experience of disconnection may be particularly pertinent among adolescents, because a strong indicator of psychological adjustment in adolescents is a sense of meaningful connection with peers (Rubin & Stewart, 1996). Second, consistent with the PSDM, we hypothesized that PSP would mediate the association between insecure attachment and social disconnection. Specifically, we tested whether any PSP facets serve as mediators of the association between insecure attachment (i.e. fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing) and social disconnection.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 178 adolescent participants (89 boys, 89 girls) was recruited from a high school in the Metro Vancouver Area as part of a study on academic and psychological well-being. Informed consent/assent from the adolescent and a parent was obtained. A total of 187 students were asked to participate (95% consent rate). Participants ranged in age from 16 to 19 years ($M = 16.20$, $SD = 1.80$). They consisted primarily of Asian (71%), Caucasian (21%), Hispanic (5%), African (2%) and other (1%) heritages. No personal identifying information was solicited on the questionnaires, assuring anonymity. All questionnaires were administered on computers with detailed instructions provided.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perfectionistic self-presentation scale-Junior Form (PSPS-Jr)

The PSPS-Jr (Hewitt et al., 2011) is an 18-item self-report scale of perfectionistic self-presentation facets. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert Scale (1 = *not at all true of me*, 5 = *very true of me*). Previous research has provided strong support for the reliability and validity of the PSPS-Jr scale (see Hewitt et al., 2011). Previous research has also provided support for the reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranged from .62 to .88) and validity of the PSPS-Jr facets with all three PSP facets associated with depression severity and perfectionism traits (Hewitt et al., 2011).

2.2.2. Relationship questionnaire (RQ)

The RQ (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) is a single item measure made up of four short paragraphs, each describing a prototypical attachment pattern: *secure*, *preoccupied*, *dismissing*, and *fearful*. Participants rated each statement on a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = *not at all like me*, 7 = *very much like me*). The RQ has demonstrated good convergent and discriminant validity (see Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). For instance, the *fearful* group was significantly lower than the *secure* and *preoccupied* groups on measures of self-disclosure, intimacy, and reliance on others. The RQ has been used with adolescents and there is good evidence of its concurrent validity (see Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004).¹

2.2.3. Social connectedness scale-revised (SCS-R)

The SCS-R (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001) is a 20-item scale that measures the degree of interpersonal connection that an individual experiences in his or her social world. The items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The coefficient alpha was .92 in the sample of 184 university students and .70 in the present sample. Social connectedness as assessed by the SCS-R was negatively correlated with measures

Table 1

Descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations, and Cronbach alpha coefficients of PSP, attachment style, and social disconnection for all participants ($n = 178$).

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
<i>Total (n = 178)</i>			
PSP Facet			
PSP	20.45	6.77	.88
NDSI	19.82	4.16	.70
NDI	11.74	3.08	.62
Attachment style			
Secure	4.60	1.93	n/a
Preoccupied	3.47	1.71	n/a
Fearful	4.03	1.85	n/a
Dismissing	4.13	1.79	n/a
Social disconnection			
SCS-R	69.01	9.44	.70

Note. PSP = perfectionistic self-promotion; NDSI = nondisplay of imperfection; NDI = nondisclosure of imperfection; SCS-R = social connectedness scale-revised.

of loneliness, social avoidance, and dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors (see Lee et al., 2001).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

The means, standard deviations, and internal consistencies for the sample are presented in Table 1. Means for PSPS-Jr (Hewitt et al., 2011), RQ (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and SCS-R (Lee et al., 2001) are generally consistent with previous research involving comparable populations.²

Correlational analyses were conducted and are shown in Table 2. In terms of the PSP facets and attachment orientations, perfectionistic self-promotion was significantly associated with scores on preoccupied attachment. Nondisplay of imperfection was negatively correlated with ratings on secure attachment. Nondisclosure of imperfection was significantly correlated with lower secure attachment, higher fearful attachment, and dismissing attachment. Furthermore, all three facets of PSP were significantly correlated with social disconnection. Finally, fearful attachment was associated with social disconnection, $r = .20$, $p < .01$.

3.2. Mediator effects for the Social Disconnection Model

The principle goal of the current study involved investigating relationships between insecure attachment style and social disconnection and whether these were mediated or had an indirect effect via perfectionistic self-presentation. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), three conditions must be satisfied prior to testing mediation. First, the predictor variable (attachment style) must be significantly associated with the dependent variable (social disconnection), denoted as *c-path* (see Table 3). Second, the predictor variable (attachment style) must be associated with the mediating variable (PSP), denoted as *a-path*. Third, the mediating variable (PSP) must be associated with the dependent variable (social disconnection) when controlling for the predictor variable (attachment style), denoted as *b-path*. Mediation is present when the association between the predictor variable (attachment style) and the dependent variable (social disconnection) when controlling for the mediating variable (PSP), denoted as *c'-path*, is significantly reduced compared to *c-path*.

² A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to examine whether there were significant differences between Caucasian and Asian participants on the RQ, the PSPS-Jr, and the SCS-R. No significant differences were found.

¹ Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the RQ cannot be calculated because it consists of single-item measures.

Table 2Correlations between PSPS-Jr subscales, attachment styles and social disconnection for all participants ($n = 178$).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Total ($n = 178$)								
1 PSP	–							
2 NDSI	.38**	–						
3 NDI	.26**	.41**	–					
4 Secure	–.13	–.22**	–.28**	–				
5 Preoccupied	.19*	.12	.04	–.03	–			
6 Fearful	–.01	.12	.23**	–.21**	.27**	–		
7 Dismissing	–.09	–.03	.16*	–.18*	–.08	–.05	–	
8 SCS-R	.15*	.29**	.22**	.01	.13	.20**	.05	–

Note. PSP = perfectionistic self-promotion; NDSI = nondisplay of imperfection; NDI = nondisclosure of imperfection; SCS-R = social connectedness scale-revised.

* $p < .05$, two-tailed.

** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Table 3Path coefficients and confidence intervals of mediational analyses, controlling for gender ($n = 178$).

Mediator variable	<i>a</i> -path	<i>b</i> -path	<i>c</i> -path	<i>c'</i> -path	95% CI
Dependent variable: social disconnection					
Predictor variable: fearful attachment					
PSP facet					
Perfectionistic self-promotion	–.02	.23*	1.03**	1.03**	–.19, .13
Nondisplay of imperfection	.30	.63***	1.03**	.85*	.06, .20
Nondisclosure of imperfection	.42***	.57*	1.03**	.79*	.03, .82

Note. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect; all numbers are unstandardized beta coefficients.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

In these mediational analyses, we used bootstrapping procedures outlined by Shrout and Bolger (2002) and Preacher and Hayes (2004). Bootstrapping is an approach that resamples the original sample size from the data multiple times, and does not rely on the assumption that data are normally distributed. Random sampling with replacement was used to create 5000 bootstrap samples that were used to estimate bias-corrected standard errors and 95% percentile confidence intervals for indirect effects (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). The indirect effect is significant at $p < .05$ if zero is not included in the 95% confidence interval for that indirect effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

We conducted mediational analyses with attachment style as the predictor variable, PSP facet as the mediator and social disconnection as the dependent variable. Gender was entered as a covariate in each analysis. As only fearful attachment was significantly associated with social disconnection; fearful attachment was entered as the predictor variable, each PSP facet (i.e. perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisplay of imperfection, or nondisclosure of imperfection) as the mediator, and social disconnection as the dependent variable. Results of these three analyses indicated that fearful attachment had a significant indirect effect on social disconnection through nondisclosure of imperfection, a 95% confidence interval of .03–.82 (see Table 3). Because zero was not within the confidence interval range, it was concluded that nondisclosure of imperfection significantly mediated the relationship between fearful attachment and social disconnection (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). None of the other PSP facets mediated this relationship.

4. Discussion

The current study assessed components of the PSDM by examining the associations among perfectionistic self-presentation, attachment styles, and social disconnection in an adolescent sample. In general, the present study supports the notion (Hewitt et al.,

2011) that adolescents show meaningful individual differences in perfectionistic self-presentation that are differentially correlated with attachment styles and psychological outcomes such as social disconnection. Our findings are consistent with the PSDM (Hewitt et al., 2006) and past research indicating that the perfectionists' attempts to appear perfect or to avoid displaying or admitting perceived imperfections may place them at greater risks for social disconnection and psychopathology (e.g. Hewitt et al., 2003, 2011).

4.1. Perfectionistic self-presentation and adult attachment

Several of our findings shed light on the origin of perfectionistic self-presentation facets in adolescents. The significant associations between insecure attachment styles (e.g. fearful, preoccupied) and various perfectionistic self-presentation facets support the notion that perfectionistic behaviors may have developmental origins in early life, and that insecure attachment may contribute to the perfectionists' desperate needs for acceptance and interpersonal connection (e.g. Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Hamachek, 1978; Horney, 1950). Horney (1950) stated that, perfectionists' maladaptive interpersonal behaviors, as reflected by excessive reassurance-seeking, excessive need to avoid appearing imperfect, hypersensitivity to criticism or reticence about perceived shortcomings and flaws, actually make the perfectionist more vulnerable to rejection and disapproval. Furthermore, the present findings are consistent with the notion that perfectionistic behavior "... reflects a deep-seated sense of inferiority and is a learned way of reaching for approval and acceptance by setting standards for achievement or performance that are unrealistically high" (Hamachek, 1978, p. 30).

In the present study, a significant association was found between perfectionistic self-promotion and preoccupied attachment, suggesting that adolescents with high preoccupied attachment are driven to appear "perfect", to engage in defensive self-inflation, and to pursue perfectionistic ideals in an attempt to gain others' approval. Furthermore, nondisclosure of imperfection was found to be significantly associated with fearful attachment style in adolescents.

The obtained findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that adolescents with avoidant tendencies (i.e. fearful, dismissing attachment style) engage in fewer and less intimate self-disclosures as a way to protect fragile self-image, to hide imperfections or to justify self-reliance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Taken together, consistent with Hewitt and colleagues' (2003) conceptualization of PSP, the need to seem perfect may be motivated by underlying feelings of inadequacy, self-doubts and an intense desire to avoid rejections (see Hewitt et al., 2003).

4.2. Perfectionistic self-presentation and social disconnection

Consonant with the idea that PSP represents a maladaptive form of impression management or neurotic interpersonal styles that contribute to problematic interpersonal relationships (Hewitt et al., 2003, 2011), all three facets of PSP were related to social disconnection, suggesting that the PSP generally is associated with a sense of disconnectedness or alienation. Self-disclosure has been identified as a key element in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, social support, and therapeutic relationships (Norcross, 2002; Runge & Archer, 1981). Individuals who are concerned about revealing or expressing their imperfections may be prone to experience difficulties in establishing and maintaining intimate relationships (Meleshko & Alden, 1993). The present findings are also consistent with earlier theoretical conceptualizations of perfectionism. Despite their intense desire for acceptance, perfectionists' "sensitivity to disapproval inhibits intimacy and deprives them of the warmth they crave" (Burns, 1980).

4.3. Mediator effects derived from the Social Disconnection Model

We also found preliminary support for the PSDM, in which interpersonal expressions of perfectionism (i.e. nondisclosure of imperfection) mediated the association between attachment insecurity (i.e. fearful attachment) and a sense of disconnection in interpersonal relationships. The excessive neediness, hypervigilance to rejection, and the perception of others as uncaring or unsupportive often associated with insecure attachment may bring about a pervasive interpersonal style characterized by nondisclosure of perceived imperfections and shortcomings. This maladaptive interpersonal style could create a sense of disconnection by appearing evasive, unengaged, and socially withdrawn (Hewitt et al., 2006). These obtained results are in line with previous research with adults (e.g. Cox et al., 2002; Wei et al., 2004, 2006) suggesting that perfectionism serves as a mediator between insecure attachment and psychological distress. Several authors (e.g. Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Crittenden, 1994; Flett et al., 2002) have suggested that children who have a fearful attachment style develop an unwillingness to disclose negative emotions due to fear of upsetting or disappointing their caregivers. The lack of disclosure prevents adolescents from engaging in open and honest communications of their feelings, and places them at a higher risk for profound social disconnection.

4.3.1. Limitations and future directions

Certain limitations of our study should be noted. First, due to the cross-sectional nature of our study, no definite conclusions can be drawn concerning the stability of the mediated effects found in this study. Future researchers should examine these variables at several time points in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of their relations over time. Second, our findings are based entirely on self-report measures. Replication of the study with other methods (e.g. interviewers' ratings) would provide more conclusive evidence for the PSDM. Moreover, internal consistency of the nondisclosure

of imperfection subscale was relatively low in this study ($\alpha = .62$) compared to Hewitt et al. (2011). It is not clear why this was the case. Future studies are needed to investigate the low alpha coefficient of this PSP facet among adolescents. Finally, our sample consisted predominantly of adolescents of Asian heritage. Future research is needed to replicate the present study with other populations.

4.4. Overall conclusions

In sum, the present findings support the contention that perfectionists may harbor deep-seated insecurities and self-doubts, and create and maintain a perfect facade in an attempt to secure approval and to protect against criticisms and rejection (e.g. Hewitt et al., 2003; Hollender, 1965). Paradoxically, perfectionists' deceptive self-presentations may inhibit their ability to maintain interpersonal relationships and social support. Consistent with past theorizing (e.g. Hewitt et al., 2006; Horney, 1950), perfectionists' need to portray an idealized self-image and their desire for interpersonal connection may be therefore fundamentally incompatible.

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