

# Perfectionism and personality

Beata Žitniaková Gurgová<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education, UMB; Ružová 13 Banská Bystrica 974 11; beata.zitniakova-gurgova@umb.sk

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**Abstract** The article deals with a theoretical and empirical analysis of the relationship between perfectionistic cognitions and personality factors of the Big Five. The presented research was made on a sample of 144 students of the Faculty of Education. The following methods were used in the research: the PCI – Perfectionism Cognitions Inventory (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, Gray, 1998) consisting of 25 items designed to identify the frequency of perfectionistic cognitions and the personality inventory NEO-FFI (Ruisel, Halama, 2007) consisting of five well-known factors created by P. T. Costa and R. R. McCare: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness. A correlation analysis of the variables confirmed statistically significant relationships between perfectionistic cognitions and neuroticism 0.467\*\*, openness to experience 0.22\*\* and agreeableness -0.251\*\*.

**Klíčová slova** perfectionism, perfectionist cognitions, personality traits, Big Five

## 1. Introduction

The present times in our countries introduce new topics to the psychology, demonstrating the need for description, explanation and application of new knowledge in the social practice. These topics include also perfectionism. Although this issue is well elaborated in foreign (in particular US) professional sources, it has been only little research-tested in our conditions. Our society is also performance-oriented, requirements for perfect performance increase at school as well as at work. Perfectionism thus appears in positive as well as in negative light. The purpose of this paper is to analyse perfectionism in the context of personality, this of the Big Five personality factors model.

### 1.1 Perfectionism

The precise definition of perfectionism is rather difficult. In the 50-ties K. Horney (1950) characterised perfectionism truthfully as the "tyranny of the shoulders". According to G. L. Flett and P. L. Hewitt (2002, p. 5) perfectionism may be characterised as the "striving for flawlessness" and "extreme perfectionists are people who want to be perfect in all aspects of their lives." From the point of view of adaptive functions, perfectionism is connected with an increased level of conscientiousness and increased level of flawlessness in performed activities. More pronounced are maladaptive functions including the connection of perfectionism with an increased level of anger (Hewitt et al., 2000),

depression (Shafran and Mansell, 2001), eating disorders (Bardone-Cone, 2007; Sassaroli et al., 2008), etc. Currently perfectionism is considered rather a multidimensional construct, although the professional discussion about whether perfectionism is a one-dimensional or a multidimensional construct has not been quite closed yet. P. L. Hewitt, G. L. Flett and their colleagues (1991) distinguish three dimensions of perfectionism:

- self-oriented perfectionism;
- other-oriented perfectionism;
- socially prescribed perfectionism.

Self-oriented perfectionists are defined as adhering to strict standards while maintaining strong motivation to attain perfection and avoid failure. They are expected to engage in stringent self-evaluation. Perfectionism oriented to others is defined as setting up unrealistic standards for others accompanied with a stringent evaluation of others' performances. Socially prescribed perfectionism is defined as a belief that others hold unrealistic expectations for our behaviour. Socially-prescribed perfectionists experience social pressure to be perfect, According to P. L. Hewitt and G. L. Flett (1991) all the three types of perfectionism are maladaptive.

In their scale (The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale) R. O. Frost at al. (1990) distinguish six subscales of perfectionism: concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticism, doubting of actions and organization.

Based on the use of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, G. L. Flett and P. L. Hewitt (2006) further distinguish positive perfectionism and negative perfectionism. The authors describe the positive perfectionism as normal, healthy perfectionism motivated only little by avoidance orientation and a fear of failure. The positive perfectionism is characterised by a high level of organisation, self-oriented perfectionism, high personal standards and positive achievement striving. The positive perfectionism is "driven by positive reinforcement and desire for success." On the contrary, the negative perfectionism is a pathological and unhealthy form having substantial disadvantages for individuals. It is connected with neuroticism, inability to feel satisfaction, maladaptive evaluation and a high level of socially prescribed perfectionism. The negative perfectionism is driven by negative reinforcement and a fear of failure.

Both Frost's and Hewitt's conceptualization of perfectionism is based on the idea that perfectionism is a general or global personality construct. Some authors (Shafran et al., 2002) present rather the opinion that perfectionism affects only certain areas of an individual's life. E. g. researches by J. Stoeber and F. S. Stoeber (2009) confirmed that although some individuals are generally perfectionism-oriented,

the majority show perfectionism only in certain areas of their lives.

## 1.2 Perfectionism and Personality Variables

In foreign literature, we find a research-tested relationship between perfectionism and the Big Five model personality factors. The relationship between perfectionism and neuroticism has been pointed out to by most research studies examining these relationships (e. g. Maier and Smith, 1999; Enns, Cox, Clara, 2005; Hill, McIntire, Bacharach, 1997, etc.). Other more numerous findings include a connection of perfectionism and conscientiousness (e. g. Stoeber, Otto, Dalbert, 2009). The relationship of the other factors of the Big Five personality model and perfectionism has not been found significant.

## 2. Research of the relationship between Perfectionism and Personality Variables

Our research aimed at finding out correlations between perfectionistic cognitions and individual factors of the Big Five personality model. Although foreign sources point out to some significant relationships, we were interested whether such relationships would show also in our research on the sample of 144 Slovak students of the Faculty of Education, chosen for administration by intentional selection. In our research, we used the personality inventory NEO-FFI (Ruisel, Halama, 2007) consisting of five well-known factors created by P.T.Costa and R.R.McCare: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness. The inventory is based on five-factors analysis of adjectives used in personality description. The inventory consists of 60 items, 12 for each factor, assessed on a 5-point scale by respondents. Another method was the PCI - a scale of perfectionistic cognitions (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, Gray, 1998) consisting of 25 items aimed to identify the frequency of perfectionist cognitions, increased striving and social comparison in a non-clinical population. A 5-point Likert scale was used for scoring the items, from "completely disagree" (0 points) to "completely agree" (4 points). The scale was internally consistent ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ) and the reliability coefficient of the test-retest made in a three-months' interval was 0.067 according to Flett et al. (1998). Ferrari (1995; according to Flett et al., 1998) confirmed Cronbach's coefficient fluctuation from 0.79 to 0.88 in three different samples. According to the mentioned authors, the validity of the PCI method is comparable with the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale.

### 2.1 Results

The statistical analysis of the variables confirmed the anticipated correlation between perfectionistic cognitions and neuroticism (Tab. 2). A weak correlation was found between perfectionistic cognitions and openness and a negative correlation between perfectionistic cognitions and agreeableness. Surprising results were obtained in the relationship between perfectionistic cognitions and conscientiousness, where no connection between the variables appeared.

Table 2 Spearman's Correlation Coefficient between the Analysed Variables

		N	E	O	P	S
Spearman's correlation coefficient	R	0.467**	-0.037	0.220**	-0.251**	0.002
	p	0.000	0.659	0.008	0.002	0.979

The obtained results when compared with foreign studies are ambiguous. A medium correlation of perfectionistic cognitions and neuroticism was confirmed, expressed by such traits as: anxiety, self-consciousness, vulnerability, depression, anger. Again, the relationship confirms the negative accent of perfectionistic tendencies. E. g., the combination of perfectionism and neuroticism was confirmed in the study by P. S. Fry and D. L. Debats as a major predictor of older adults' mortality (2009). The relationship between perfectionistic cognitions and openness was not expected. The openness to experience is manifested by fantasy, aesthetics, variety of experience, action, ideas, values. It can be assumed that the results were influenced by the specific research sample of university students preparing mostly for the teaching profession. The negative correlation between agreeableness and perfectionism highlights the connection between perfectionism and the negative end of the agreeableness manifested by controlling others, aggressive acts, excessive rapacity and tendency to assert oneself at the expense of others. The above traits reflect the type of other-oriented perfectionism setting unrealistic standards for others with a stringent evaluation of others' performances. Out of positive personality traits related to perfectionistic cognitions, only openness to experience appears in our research. Personality factors of the Big Five model and perfectionism manifest themselves as substantial predictors of human behaviour in various situations. The above variables proved out to be important also in the choice of career (Page, Bruch, Haase, 2008) where maladaptive perfectionism characterised by a fear of making mistakes and a belief that others have high expectations of your performance shows in low self-efficacy in the choice of career. The results of our research point out to a different value of perfectionistic cognitions. It is proved also by foreign studies (Hill et al., 1997) in which maladaptive perfectionism positively correlates with neuroticism and adaptive perfectionism positively correlates with conscientiousness. According to J. Stoeber, K. Otto and C. Dalbert, conscientiousness is related to self-oriented perfectionism. Our research clearly showed a statistically significant relationship with neuroticism.

### 2.2 Conclusion

The purpose of our research was to confirm findings of foreign researches on a sample of our university respondents. We believe that we should use also Multidimensional Perfectionism Scales in our future research. The Perfectionism Cognitions Inventory used in the above research indicates the frequency of perfectionistic cognitions. Our findings show that with the increasing rate of neuroticism in respondents also the frequency of perfectionistic cognitions increases. The connection of such cognitions with anxiety was pointed out to already by K. Horney, as well as Ellis's cognitive-emotive therapy. The slight connection of perfectionistic cognitions and (dis)agreeableness also points out rather to the negative aspect of a high frequency of such cognitions. It would be interesting to compare the extent of perfectionistic cognitions and specific achievements, thus the quality of respondents' performance.

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