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PERFECTIONISM, LEARNING ENGAGEMENT AND WELL-BEING IN A UNIVERSITY STUDENT SAMPLE

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Abstract

Within the present-day socio-economic background, students face multiple challenges related to the development of professional abilities and competencies necessary for the integration on the labour market, to the attainment of their potential, to the assumption of risks reinforced by trust, resistance and security with a view to become efficient, flexible and balanced persons able to manage uncertainty and changes . Perfectionism is an important individual trait and a significant predictor of psychological dysfunctions in college student populations. Learning engagement is a key process in predicting academic adjustment and academic performance. The present research aims to explore the relationships between multidimensional perfectionism, learning engagement, conscientiousness and well-being in a Romanian university student sample. More specifically, we tested a moderated mediation analysis to highlight if learning engagement will mediate the conscientiousness and academic well-being, but the mediation effect will be moderated self-oriented perfectionism. Our study revealed significant associations between the dimensions of perfectionism and personality traits, academic engagement and academic well-being, the most important dimension being self-oriented perfectionism. Conscientiousness was a more relevant predictor than neuroticism, especially when it was combined with self-oriented perfectionism. Our analysis showed that the association between conscientiousness and engagement decreases and their combined effects on well-being also decrease if perfectionism decreases. Thus, maintaining a realistic self-oriented perfectionism would lead to a positive effect of conscientiousness on learning engagement and respectively on academic well-being. The findings of this study have important implications for understanding the role of perfectionism in academic engagement and academic well-being.

Keywords: Academic well-being, conscientiousness, learning engagement, neuroticism, perfectionism, self-oriented perfectionism.

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1. Introduction

The transition towards the university environment is associated with a series of social, emotional and academic requirements which can lead to psychological distress (Wynaden, Wichmann, & Murray, 2013) and implicitly influences the quality of academic life. Many students develop adaptive behaviours and comply with challenges, obtaining academic success, (Rüppel, Liersch, & Walter, 2015), learning performances, low procrastination tendencies (Page & Vella Brodrick, 2008), while others report psychological distress, stress and low performances in their academic activity.

The specialty literature considers that the essential condition of a successful adaptation to academic environment is given by students' engagement in both school community (participation in the activities of the academic community) and learning process (attention, interest, effort). The engagement towards the learning activity refers not only to the capacity to put effort, concentration and persistence in doing tasks, to the pleasure derived from the learning process but also to the adaptation of efficient cognitive strategies (Robu, 2013).

On a personal level, learning engagement is related to the concept of well-being, operationalized in relation to intrapersonal and interpersonal trust, self-esteem and social and emotional skills but also to certain personality traits such as conscientiousness or perfectionism.

2. Problem Statement

The student's well-being became a key element of higher education. Defined as a multidimensional concept, well-being is conceptualized in a hedonic manner (*subjective well-being*) and approached as *life satisfaction* (a feeling of fulfilment related to what a person needs or wishes from life) and *happines* (frequent experience of positive emotion, associated with rare negative ones) (Diener, Sapyta, & Suh 1998), as well as in an eudodaimonic manner (*psychological well-being*), approached as an engagement in relation to life challenges (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002) and conceptualized as *self-acceptance*, *positive relationship with other people*, *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, *purpose in life*, *personal growth* (Ryff, 1989). Latest approaches on well-being advance a new concept - *covitality* defined as "*the sinergistic effect of positive mental health resulting from the the interplay among multiple positive -psychological building blocks*" (Furlong, Gilman, & Huebner, 2014, p. 3). In our study covitality is defined "*as an individual`s cumulative subjective well-being, which, at the most basic level, consist of a combination of emotional, cognitive, social and behavioral components- how people feel, think, relate, and act – that are either valued for their own sake, or because they function to attain things that are valued for their own sake, or possibility to both." (*Renshaw & Bolognino, 2016, p.464).

Researchers have suggested that the differences in psychological well-being could be attributed to individual differences or personality. Academic well-being is associated with some personality traits described by Big Five Model (*conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness and openness*). Personality traits are considered to be capable of influencing well-being, in a direct or indirect way. Thus, it is widely held that individuals with a high degree of conscientiousness tend to perform tasks in an efficient and thorough manner which leads to success in school and the workplace (Noftle & Robins, 2007). Success can contribute to a positive association between conscientiousness (the tendency to have a sense of achievement and dependability) and well-being through material (income) or psychological (sense of

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purpose) effects it can bring up. Conscientiousness increases the probability of positive social experiences and can lead to situations directly associated to well-being (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Also, neuroticism (the tendency to exhibit poor emotional adjustment such as anxiety, impulsivity and fear) negatively influences well-being. Personality traits can serve as both protective and deterring factors to health, as is evident in previous literature (Raynor & Levine, 2009).

Studies in the specialty literature advocate a positive association between learning engagement and well-being, thus students who are engaged in learning profess to be optimistic, self-confident, with high levels of resilience and self-efficacy. Learning engagement is characterized (Schaufeli & Baker, 2004) by vigor (willingness to invest effort, not being easily fatigued and persistence in the face of difficulties), dedication (a sense of significance from one`s work, feeling enthusiastic and proud and feeling inspired and challenged by it) and absorption (being totally and happily immersed in one`s work and having difficulties detaching oneself from it so that time passes quickly and one forgets everything else that is around). Personality traits can influence activity engagement as they can influence motivation, participation, attitude in the learning task. Studies report that conscientiousness can be a predictor of learning performance (Dean, Conte, & Blankenhorn, 2006). However, this relation can be disturbed by another personality trait – perfectionism. Immoderate preoccupations of perfectionists related to mistakes can distract students' attention from tasks which can lead to self-sabotage. Explicative models of perfectionisms indicate that self-oriented perfectionism is characterized by excessively high standards and social perfectionism is characterized by high standards set by others. Both types of perfectionism associate with personality traits of: conscientiousness to show significant positive correlations with self-oriented perfectionism and neuroticism to show significant positive correlations with socially prescribed perfectionism (Stoeber et al., 2009). Persons dominated by conscientiousness are ambitious, organized and set high standards, becoming self-oriented while persons with high levels of neuroticism are tense, anxious, developing social perfectionism types. Perfectionism is an important individual trait and a significant predictor of psychological dysfunction in college student populations Studies found that perfectionism is associated with maladjustment, depression, hopelessness and negative affectivity. Most of the studies found that perfectionism was linked to negative symptoms, but the multidimensional models of perfectionism lead us to the idea that not only maladaptive perfectionism count, but also adaptive perfectionism, described as positive, normal or healthy perfectionism and characterized by strivings to high standards of performance.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions had been formulated:

There are associations between personality traits and perfectionism.

There will be a positive relation between conscientiousness and learning engagement. However, this positive relation will be moderated by self-oriented perfectionism.

Learning engagement will act as an indirect, conditional mechanism for the positive effects of conscientiousness on academic well-being. Specifically, learning engagement will mediate this relationship, but the mediation effect will be moderated self-oriented perfectionism (Figure 01).

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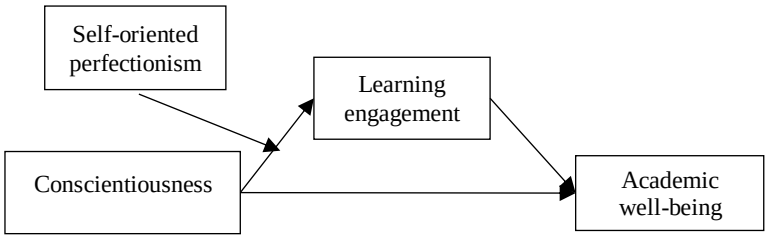

Figure 01. Relationships between multidimensional perfectionism, learning engagement, conscientiousness and well-being]

4. Purpose of the Study

The present research aims to explore the relationships between multidimensional perfectionism, learning engagement, conscientiousness and well-being in a university student sample.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Study design

This study used a cross-sectional, correlational design.

5.2. Sample

The sample consisted of 163 Romanian university students: 20 boys and 143 girls, with an average age of 22.54 years (*SD* = 4.75), from various study programs. The questionnaires had been administered online, the participation being voluntary and unpaid.

5.3. Instruments

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) consists of 45 items and measures self-oriented perfectionism (15 items), socially prescribed perfectionism (15 items), and other-oriented perfectionism (15 items). Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (disagree) to 7 (agree). The three subscales of The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale have good reliability indices (Self-oriented perfectionism: α= .90; Socially prescribed perfectionism: α= .76; Other-oriented perfectionism: α= .79).

The College Student Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (Renshaw & Bolognino, 2016) consists of 16 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (4 items, α = .95) and measuring college-specific wellbeing behaviours: academic satisfaction (4 items, α = .88) academic efficacy (4 items, α = .89), school connectedness (4 items, α = .80), and college gratitude (4 items, α = .85).

The Utrecht Learning Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Baker, 2004) assess students' academic engagement and it is composed of 17 items that assess: vigour (6 items, α = .89), absorption (6 items, α = .93) and dedication (5 items, α = .92), each item is assessed using a Likert scale that ranges between 0 (Never) and 6 (Every day). Cronbach's Alpha for the total scale is .96.

We also measured conscientiousness and neuroticism as personality traits, using two of the IPIP 50 scales (Rusu, Maricutoiu, Macsinga, Vîrgã, & Sava, 2012). Cronbach's Alpha for the conscientiousness scale is .76 and for Neuroticism is .83.

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6. Findings

Neuroticism and Conscientiousness were significantly correlated with the perfectionism dimensions, self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) being positively associated with conscientiousness, while socially-prescribed perfectionism (SPP) was positively associated with neuroticism. Other-oriented perfectionism (OOP) did not relate with the personality traits and the total perfectionism correlate only with conscientiousness (Table 01).

Table 01. Pearson correlation coefficients between Big Five personality traits, learning engagement, academic well-being and perfectionism

	SOP	**OOP**	**SSP**	**Perfectionism total**
Neuroticism	-.023	-.038	.262***	.071
Conscientiousness	.409***	.139	-.098	.233**
Vigor	.502***	.177*	-.070	.312**
Dedication	.497***	.212**	-.114	.307***
Absorption	.425***	.108	-.053	.250**
Learning engagement	.517***	.177*	-.084	.315***
Academic satisfaction	.476***	.181*	-.151	.269***
Academic self-efficacy	.519***	.144	-.120	.289***
School connectedness	.474***	.251**	-.186*	.283***
Academic gratitude	.466***	.239**	-.130	.295***
Academic well-being	.529***	.222**	-.161*	.311***

Note: $N = 163$, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

The associations between learning engagement and the multidimensional perfectionism were significant, self-oriented perfectionism showing the strongest positive correlations, with all the engagement dimensions. Other-oriented perfectionism was weakly correlated with vigour, dedication and the overall score, while socially-prescribed perfectionism was unrelated to learning engagement (Table 02).

Academic well-being was associated with perfectionism and consistent with previous results reported in this study, self-oriented perfectionism was the dimension showing the strongest correlations. Other-oriented perfectionism correlated weakly with three of the well-being dimensions (academic satisfaction, school-connectedness, academic gratitude), while socially-prescribed perfectionism related negatively and weakly only with school connectedness (Table 03). However, the overall scores of perfectionism were positively correlated with the dimensions of academic well-being.

The moderated mediation was computed using PROCESS custom dialog release 2.16.3 (Hayes, 2013). Results of estimating the first-stage moderation are shown in the left criterion panel in Table 02. Regression coefficients are unstandardized. The conditional effect of conscientiousness on learning engagement (path *a1*) was positive and significant. This means that higher levels of conscientiousness predicted higher levels of learning engagement when participants had an average level of perfectionism. The conditional effect of perfectionism on learning engagement (path *a2*) was positive and significant. This means that higher levels of perfectionism predicted higher levels of engagement when participants had an average level of conscientiousness. Importantly, coefficient *a3* for the interaction term (conscientiousness

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× perfectionism) was negative and significant. Thus, the effect of conscientiousness (the focal predictor) on engagement depended linearly on self-oriented perfectionism (the moderator).

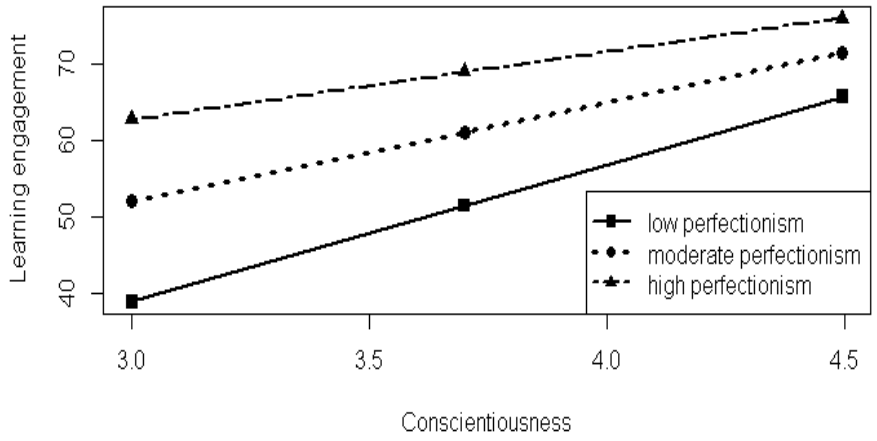

Figure 02. The moderating effect of self-oriented perfectionism on the positive relations between conscientiousness and learning engagement

The association between conscientiousness and engagement decreases if perfectionism decreases. Figure 02 shows the simple slopes for conscientiousness's effect on learning engagement at three SD), "average" (sample mean), and "high" (+ *1 SD*) levels of perfectionism: *c1* low *b* = .71, *CI* = [.46, .98], *c2* average *b* = .51, *CI* = [.30, .71], *c3* high *b* = .35 *CI* = [.04, .62]. All confidence intervals are different from zero which confirms the moderation hypothesis. As can be seen from the direction of the simple slopes in Figure 02, the effect of trait conscientiousness on engagement was consistently positive at the different levels of perfectionism. However, the non-parallel gradient of the slopes clearly highlights the significant interaction: ss perfectionism decreased (moving from high toward low) the positive effect of conscientiousness on learning engagement reduced.

For the moderated mediation (Full Model), the results are also listed in Table 02. In the second-stage of the model, the effect of learning engagement on well-being (path b) was positive and significant after controlling for other predictors, indicating that higher levels of engagement independently predicted higher levels of well-being. Taken in conjunction with our earlier first-stage findings, this might suggest a conditional indirect effect of conscientiousness on well-being through engagement, contingent upon perfectionism. The direct effect of consciousness on wellbeing is not significant, but the indirect effects are significant, which proves the mediation and the moderated mediation, as the negative and significant index of moderated mediation showed. The mediation effect of conscientiousness on well-being through learning engagement is moderated by the self-oriented perfectionism. The association between conscientiousness and engagement decreases and their combined effects on well-being also decrease if perfectionism decreases. Thus, maintaining a realistic self-oriented perfectionism would lead to a positive effect of conscientiousness on learning engagement and respectively on academic well-being.

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Table 02. Ordinary least squares regression coefficients, with (standard errors) and [confidence intervals], estimating learning engagement and well-being

Criterion	**Learning engagement**				**Academic well-being**			
Predictor	Parameter	Coeff.	SE	95%CI	Parameter	Coeff.	SE	95%CI
Conscientiousness	a_1	30.15^{**}	8.42	[13.52, 46.78]	c'	$.13^{ns}$	.12	[-.10, 3.16]
Learning engagement					b	$.04^{**}$	.003	[.03, .04]
Perfectionism	a_2	19.32^{**}	6.40	[6.67, 31.98]				
Conscientiousness x Perfectionism	a_3	-3.44^{*}	1.70	[-6.81, -.07]				
Intercept	i_M	-83.49^{**}			i_Y	2.41^{***}		
	$R^2 = .42$, $F(3,162) = 38.98$, $p < .001$				$R^2 = .55$, $F(2,163) = 100.07$, $p < .001$			
	Index of moderated mediation $a_3b = -.13$, bias corrected bootstrap $CI = [-.28, -.003]$							

Note: $N = 163$ *SE* standard error, *CI* confidence interval, $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$ (two-tailed)

6.1. Discussions

Our results are convergent with other researches, the majority of studies showing that conscientiousness is positively related to self-oriented perfectionism (but not with socially prescribed perfectionism), and neuroticism is positively related to socially prescribed perfectionism (but not with self-oriented perfectionism) (Dunkley & Kyparissis, 2008; Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 2007; Stoeber, Otto, & Dalbert, 2009; Sherry, Hewitt, Flett, Lee-Baggley, & Hall, 2007). The results showed that highly conscientious individuals who are organized, reliable, and ambitious are prone to be high in self-oriented perfectionism (Stoeber, Otto, & Dalbert, 2009). The positive association between socially-oriented perfectionism could confirm previous findings that socially prescribed perfectionism could be a form of neurotic perfectionism (Hamachek, 1978).

The majority of studies focus on the associations between engagement in the workplace and perfectionism, while the link between perfectionism and academic engagement is not very widely researched (Closson & Boutilier, 2017; Damian, Stoeber, Negru-Subtirica, & Baban 2017; Shim, Rubenstein, & Drapeau, 2016). Our results indicated that self-oriented perfectionistic tendencies are associated with academic engagement, thus students devoting more time and effort to their studies get a sense of fulfilment of their academic work. In comparison to the study conducted by Closson and Boutilier (2017), in our study the socially-prescribed perfectionism did not associate with learning engagement. Despite the promising results, the lack of studies on the link between perfectionism and academic engagement imposes the necessity of future research on this topic. However only the study of Clossom and Boutilier (2017) and our study focused on university students, while the other ones cited above include middle school and high school students.

Concerning the associations between perfectionism and academic well-being, our study showed interesting results. We found positive correlations for the self-oriented perfectionism although the majority of studies considers perfectionism as a maladaptive personality trait, highlighting the psychological distress of perfectionists (Suh, Gnilka, & Rice, 2017). Students with high levels of self-oriented perfectionism had higher level of academic well-being, showing that more perfectionist students could value their

performances in academic settings concentrating on what has been achieved rather than focusing on the discrepancy between aims and achievements (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). From this point of view, perfectionism could be a predictor of academic adjustment, this relation being a future study direction. Studies found that socially-prescribed perfectionism is negatively associated with achievement (Blankstein & Winkworth, 2004), while some studies showed that self-oriented perfectionism facilitates high achievement and psychological adjustment (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Verner-Filion & Gaudreau, 2010).

7. Conclusion

Despite the correlational nature of this study which is a major limitation, we consider that this study's findings have important implications for understanding the role of perfectionism in academic engagement and academic well-being. Practices that support student mental health are critical to improving academic and life outcomes, therefore, given the significant role of positive perfectionism, educators and counsellors should propose programs focused on the development of positive perfectionism as a predictor of academic well-being.

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