Overcoming Perfectionism: My Journey with the Binary Mindset

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Introduction

Sunday -11:00 am:

> *I have my laptop opened and holding my fresh coffee in my hand. Staring at the screen and thinking about how I can write a perfect conference paper for ASEE 2021. I glance at the ASEE 2021 conference banner and think about why they have chosen an ocean view with turtles and fish for the theme...the research continues with googling the banner and the justification for turtles...*

> *Then, I notice that I have been reading and staring at the banner for more than two hours...*

As graduate students, we are all aware of procrastination, overthinking, and anxiety. Even though we might not have gathered these concepts under perfectionism, there is a high chance that we might be seeking perfection and being perfect in our roles.

In this paper, I am going to look at the concept of perfectionism, research methods and findings of it, and a method to cope with it that can simplify our life.

A brief overview on Perfectionism Terms and Definitions

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines perfectionism as "a tendency to demand of others or oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation" [1]. In this paper, the focus is on the demands of oneself that lead to maladaptive behaviors and feelings like procrastination and paralyzing anxiety. This approach includes perfectionism cognitions and perfectionistic self-representations.

Perfectionism cognitions are the automatic thoughts that reflect the need to be perfect and awareness of imperfections whereas **perfectionistic self-representations** focus on a thought process involving the need to appear perfect or avoid appearing imperfect to others [2]. Researchers often describe perfectionism based on the level of adjustment difficulties to the self and the environment. Three common characterizations are described below [2]:

Positive vs. Negative
Positive perfectionism is based on a perfectionistic behavior which is a function of positive reinforcements such as willingness to approach a stimulus (task or person), whereas negative perfectionism revolves around strong desires to avoid unwanted results.

Adaptive vs. Maladaptive
Adaptive perfectionism encompasses behavioral measures that include self-oriented perfectionism and high personal standards. Maladaptive perfectionism includes socially prescribed perfectionism and excessive concerns over mistakes. Maladaptive perfectionism can

be associated with procrastination while adaptive perfectionism contributes to the timely completion of tasks.

Normal vs. Neurotic

Perfectionism can be classified as normal or neurotic. Normal perfectionism refers to striving for reasonable and realistic standards which leads to a sense of self-satisfaction and enhanced self-esteem. Neurotic perfectionism refers to an inclination to assess excessively high standards which are motivated by fear of failure and concerns over others' disappointments.

Looking at these characteristics of perfectionism, we can see overlapping features such as avoiding negative outcomes, concerns over mistakes, and fear of failure. These descriptors also emphasize that perfectionism can manifest in helpful or unhelpful ways [2].

Measurement and Dimensions of Perfectionism

There have been various conceptualizations in defining the one-dimensional or multi-dimensional perspective of perfectionism. The unidimensional view of perfectionism has a focus on cognitive factors solely in the form of irrational beliefs [2]. This perspective has been used frequently in the eating disorder literature to measure perfectionism through a six-item subscale of the Eating Disorder Inventory (EDI).

One of the major advancements in this field is the emergence of multidimensional views of perfectionism which encompass personal and interpersonal aspects. These views are reflected in instruments such as the "Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale" (MPS) [2], which has promoted the idea that perfectionism has a complex nature that cannot be explained through unidimensional approaches alone.

In this section, we look at four perfectionism instruments that were developed based on various aspects of perfectionism.

Burns Perfectionism Scale (1980)

Burns' Perfectionism Scale contributes to the first instruments developed on perfectionism. It was developed based on measuring self-defeating attitudes that are associated with clinical depression and anxiety. According to Burns, perfectionism is a characteristic that a person possesses with "standards high beyond reach or reason." Furthermore, he adds that a perfectionist person "strains compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and measures his worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment" [3, p. 34]. Thus, we can refer to the Burns Perfectionism Scale (BPS), which aims to measure a maladaptive characteristic. BPS has a 10-item unidimensional scale with items on a 5-point Likert scale. For example, respondents can indicate whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: "*If I don't set the highest standards for myself, I am likely to end up a second-rate person.*"

Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS, 1990)

Before starting to develop the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, Frost and his colleagues highlighted the diverse and nonspecific definitions of perfectionism. Furthermore, they indicated some important features of perfectionism [4].

1. Excessively high personal standards (PS), e.g., "*I have extremely high goals.*"

2. Excessive concerns over mistakes in performance (CM), e.g., "*I should be upset if I make a mistake.*"
3. Doubting of the quality of one's performance and actions (DA), e.g., "*Even when I do something very carefully, I often feel that it is not quite right.*"
4. The role of the expectations of parents (PE), e.g., "*My parents wanted me to be the best at everything.*"
5. The role of criticism of parents (PC), e.g., "*I never felt like I could meet my parents' expectations.*"
6. An exaggerated emphasis on precision, order, and organization. (O) e.g., "*Neatness is very important for me*"

Frost and his colleagues started the scale development with 67 items derived from BPS and newly developed items. They selected the potential items based on their conceptual fit with each of the six dimensions mentioned above. After revisions, the Organization scale (O) was dropped and the number of items in the instrument was reduced to 35.

Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (1991)
Although Hewitt & Flett named their multidimensional perfectionism scale as MPS, the same as Frost's MPS instrument, the dimensions of perfectionism that Hewitt and Flett suggested were distinctly different [2]. Hewitt & Flett looked more into what is missing in the perfectionism instrument. Based on their observations, the existing scales needed more interpersonal aspects. Hence, they came up with three components to the instrument which were self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and other-oriented perfectionism. They also note that the major distinction among the three dimensions of perfectionism is based on the source and direction of perfectionistic behavior. The final instrument has 45 items with 15 items measuring each component:
1. Self-oriented, e.g., "I must always be successful at school or work."
2. Socially prescribed, e.g., "The people around me expect me to succeed at everything I do."
3. Other-oriented perfectionism, e.g., "I do not have very high standards for those around me."

Almost Perfect Scale (APS) (1995)
The development of the APS scale was created with a counseling perspective with different assumptions about the nature of perfectionism. APS attempts to highlight the differences between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. The instrument was started with 62 items from various sources to measure high personal standards, anxiety, and procrastination [5]. The instrument was finalized with the following factors:
1. Standards and order, e.g., "*I like to always be organized and disciplined.*"
2. Relationships (with others), e.g., "*I feel uncomfortable in intimate relationships.*"
3. Procrastination, e.g., "*I tend to put things off for as long as I can.*"
4. Anxiety, e.g., "*I often feel anxious when I strive to complete a task.*"

One of the issues with APS instruments is that some of the subscales such as "Relationship" lacked face validity. While some perfectionist individuals could indicate that they feel difficult to talk about their feelings with others, there is no major reason to conclude that such statements are specific to perfectionism.

Each instrument has added depth to how we understand perfectionism and related factors.

Selected Findings on Perfectionism

One study has investigated the longitudinal effects of perfectionism on academic burnout[5] The participants of the study were 336 secondary school students (7th-12th grades) and 63% female. The findings of this study showed that perfectionism increases emotional burnout and fatigue.

Furthermore, Tobin [6] has studied whether the interaction of perfectionism with mindfulness can predict anxiety and depression. The participants of this study were 124 community adults (19-56 years old). Based on the findings of this paper, individuals with lower mindfulness and higher levels of anxiety and depression demonstrate a higher degree of vulnerability to self-critical perfectionism.

In a similar study, Smith [7] has questioned the relationship between perfectionism, depressive symptoms, and/or a complication of depressive symptoms through a meta-analysis of 67 longitudinal studies. The findings of this study demonstrated that perfectionism is not only a vulnerability factor for depression but also for the complications of depressive symptoms such as neuroticism.

Tools

Thanks to the research behind perfectionism, there are multiple tools developed to overcome perfectionism. Such tools include creating mini habits to achieve the big goal and breaking down the goals into "bite-size" tasks. Guise [8] has looked at the concept of perfectionism more practically. He suggests that to overcome perfectionism, it is very effective to create a "Binary Mindset" towards the goals we aim to achieve. Binary Mindset suggests breaking down the big goal to as small as possible or until it is undividable and then start implementing them.

The main focus of this paper is to showcase how I am learning to overcome my perfectionism through the Binary Mindset. My big goal was to write this paper for the student division at ASEE 2021 conference.

The journey started with me, my laptop, and staring. I was just not making any progress. I knew what I need to do, I knew when it was due, but somehow, I wanted to take more time thinking about it rather than "writing" it. I was afraid whether what I am going to write would make any sense and why people would be willing to read about it! But I was sure about one thing, being in academia for more than two decades through various ups and downs physically and mentally, I had learned that I am committed to not allowing stress and anxiety to rule my life.

With shaky hands, I found myself applying the Binary Mindset by just putting three words in a blank Google document. I was so glad that I have three words, so I decided to reward myself with a fresh cup of coffee with an added non-dairy almond whip cream. I just had my first task done! This small accomplishment motivated me to keep track of my tasks and observe my accomplishments.

I aimed to break down the big goal (writing conference paper) as small as possible, into items that could only be considered complete (1) or not (0). The next task on my list was to "Open the

ASEE page" (1) which was followed by the second task "Copy the accepted abstract to the Google Doc" (1). My third task entailed "Drafting the outline" (1) where I added my initial three words from task one and few other concepts. For day 1, that was quite an accomplishment for me and there was no stress. On contrary, I felt that I have enough ideas to create the content around. The next day started with filling the outline as I go. To make my literature research innovative, I watched two TED talks (1) over perfectionism and noted down the key thoughts in three sentences (1). In the following days, I was still filling the outline with more literature and some of my thoughts (1). Everything was going smoothly until my exams week where I could not find enough time to work on my tasks (0). Surprisingly, I was not feeling depressed, anxious, or not good enough. I looked back at what I have accomplished and assured myself, "That is Okay. We will continue building on what I have."

I observed that the strength of this method is mainly based on its simplicity and clarity with each task. For example, the first task was **just** to open the ASEE web page, and the second task was to copy the accepted abstract to another document. It is nearly impossible to not accomplish either task. Yet, if a task is missed, it is not the end of the world. Breathe and continue with the next task because first of all, the tasks are planned clearly and they are small-sized and doable!

I experienced not being disappointed in myself, because I knew I had accomplished multiple tasks before- no matter how small, and one non-accomplishment would not define my progress. I believed that I could self-regulate my thoughts after completing tasks to obtain more and more self-efficacy. Hence, seeing that I have already completed the first two tasks, I felt more confident instantly to accomplish more tasks.

Next, I started thinking about how I can make myself more accountable for my small tasks with the big goal. I looked at available online sources for graduate students and writing resources in particular. Through the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD)[9], I could submit a request for a writing partner. A day after, I was matched with another graduate student who was looking for a writing accountability partner as well. We started with creating a google sheet with our mini-tasks to achieve our big goals (Figure 1). This step helped me to start with writing down my mini-tasks and not being afraid of writing down any little steps such as writing 59 words.

Date		#words	HB GOAL	HB RESULT	HB REASON
Fri	01/22/21		-	-	Packing
Sat	01/23/21		-	-	Moving
Sun	01/24/21		Finnish poster design for Dr. Brogdan	√	Very glad for volunteerting! ☺
Mon	01/25/21	200	Add to draft conference paper ASEE 2021	√	Touching the draft everyday-no matter how little- makes it great!
Tue	01/26/21	152	Added an excerpt abot "Procrastination & Perfectionism" to the paper	√	.a little bit everyday...
Wed	01/27/21		I had the idea about adding the concept of 'Mindset' as a seperare title to the paper! This also can clear the critics in response to the 3rd reveiwer's feedback.	√	I didn't add anything to the draft but has an idea only to share with Marisa next week and also I can add this to the paper tomorrow .
Thu	01/28/21		-	X	I was irresponsible
Fri	01/29/21	59	From the book procrastination- added to draft	√	Book was borrowed from pickens county libray [not even campus library] so proud of myself ☐lol
Sat	01/30/21				Busy with coursework 📚
Sun	01/31/21				Break day ☕

Figure 1. Google sheet for tracking mini-tasks

Conclusion

In this paper, my focus was on looking at how perfectionism can work against our goals. All four instruments indicated similar aspects of perfectionism such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, and setting high standards. I believe the first step for us, graduate students, is to identify these thoughts and behaviors. We all have witnessed how a huge goal with unclear tasks can be scary, leading to procrastination and finally, not being satisfied with the outcome.

By knowing the main reason behind being afraid of mistakes, we can pause and look at the pros and cons of such behavior. Binary Mindset is one of the useful ways that focus on action by eliminating overthinking and breaking the steps into the smallest units of the tasks.

Regardless of the small size of the task, focusing on taking action to accomplish the task both moves us closer to the final goal and empowers us to tackle the next task.

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