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Fear of Negative Evaluation and Feelings of Inferiority in Predicting Perfectionism*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Humankind changes, develops and adapts to new situations at every second of a person's life. In this process, the person tends to aim for the better and the perfect for himself/herself. Perfectionism is a personality trait that includes high standards and aiming for excellence. It includes cognitive and behavioral aspects, such as over-performance and critical evaluation of behavior in order to achieve the goals that are set (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Researchers have tried to classify perfectionism as functional-healthy or dysfunctional-unhealthy. There are also other classifications: for example, negative, positive (Terry-Short et al., 1995); passive, active (Adkins & Parker, 1996); maladaptive and adaptive (Rice et al., 1998); unhealthy, healthy (Stumpf & Parker, 2000); dysfunctional, functional (Rhéaume et al., 2000); and personal concerns and standards (Blankstein & Dunkley, 2002). By functional and healthy perfectionism, it is meant that the person adopts high standards and excellence and therefore, the person is making the effort and planning strategies to achieve this. Dysfunctional and unhealthy perfectionism includes problems that negatively affect the functionality of the individual, such as fear of making mistakes, performance anxiety, concern about parental criticism, and repetitive thoughts about mistakes in an effort to achieve high standards and perfection (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Consequently, while perfectionist efforts (planning strategies, time management and the like) are high in healthy perfectionism, there is an increase in unhealthy perfectionism, perfectionist concerns (fear of making mistakes, stress etc.) as well as perfectionist efforts.

Perfectionism has been the subject of research for many years. In one of the first research studies, Burns (1980) defines perfectionism as a single structure. Later, the multidimensional structure was focused on. For example, in one study, perfectionism is defined in six sub-dimensions: high personal standards; excessive concern over making mistakes; the perception of high parental criticism; the doubting of the quality of one's actions; the perception of high parental expectations; and a preference for order (Frost et al., 1990). In another multidimensional perspective, three dimensions draw attention;

namely, self-oriented perfectionism (setting high standards for one's self), other-oriented perfectionism (having high expectations from others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (those around expecting high standards from the person) (Hewitt et al., 1991).

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Individuals with a perfectionist personality trait have an 'all or nothing' way of thinking (Hewitt & Flett, 1993), tend to see goals as demands, and use a language of necessity, such as 'must' and 'have to' (Barrow & Moore, 1983). When they have trouble in reaching the goals, they do not turn to options, such as evaluating their goals or downsizing; in other words, they cannot show cognitive flexibility (Ferrari & Mautz, 1997). While they consider unreached goals as important, they see these goals as unimportant when they are reached, and their self-appreciation or rewarding rates are low when they achieve success (Barrow & Moore, 1983). They experience feelings of anxiety and inferiority (Ashby & Kottman, 1996; Mobley et al., 2005), emotional stress (Flett et al.,1995), hopelessness (Flett et al.,1995; Halpin & Lester, 2001), depression (Hewitt et al., 1996), anger (Esfahani & Besharat, 2010; Saboonchi & Lundh, 2003), low self-esteem (Stumpf & Parker, 2000), and shame and guilt following failure (Stoeber et al., 2008) that negatively affect the individual's functionality. Behaviorally, actions such as striving to achieve what is desired, constantly checking performance, and making plans are observed. Individuals can display certain behavior: such as postponing or quitting when they face the fear of failure due to having difficulty in reaching standards with unrealistic goals (Egan et al., 2011) and being constantly alert about making mistakes and running away (Shafran et al., 2002).

When the literature is examined, it is found that perfectionism is associated with many psychological problems, such as neuroticism (Flett et al., 1989), stress (Flett et al., 1995), dysfunctional coping skills and problems in relationships (Flett, 2003; Flett et al., 1994), low self-esteem (Stumpf & Parker, 2000), self-harm (Street & Lester, 2000), alcohol use (Nealis & Mackinnon, 2018), depression (Hewitt et al., 1996; Nakano, 2009), self-blame (Dunkley et al., 2003), eating disorders (Besser et al., 2008). In addition, it was found that in healthy perfectionism there is less self-doubt than in unhealthy perfectionism (Ashby & Bruner, 2005), anxiety, feelings of inferiority (Ashby & Kottman, 1996; Mobley et al., 2005), dysfunctional coping styles, depression symptoms, and somatization (Dixon et al., 2004)

When looking at research that deals with perfectionism in Türkiye, in one study it was found that the levels of problem solving and perfectionism elucidate the subscales of social anxiety (social avoidance, distress, and fear of negative evaluation) (Hamarta, 2009). Additionally, individuals experiencing trait anxiety, one of the sub-dimensions of anxiety, were found to have higher scores of socially prescribed perfectionism in a separate investigation (Tuncer & Voltan Acar, 2006). While finding a positive correlation between social anxiety and perfectionism sub-dimensions, it was concluded that various dimensions of social anxiety predicted perfectionism (Kiper, 2016). It was found that perfectionism has negative effects on self-esteem, excessive concern for mistakes, the perception of parental criticism and parental expectations, and doubting the quality of one's action, as well as positive effects on personal standards (Aydemir & Arlı, 2019). In a study on healthy-unhealthy perfectionism, unhealthy perfectionism was found to be associated with self-handicapping (Özlü & Topkaya, 2020).

The fact that individuals make perfectionist efforts by setting high performance goals for themselves may be related to a fear of being evaluated negatively. This is because these people cannot meet expectations in social situations, develop thoughts that they should be perceived better by the environment or that they should behave better (Besser, Flett & Hewit, 2004). Fear of being evaluated negatively is a situation when examining evaluation by others, thus feeling discomfort as a result of negative evaluation, and predicting that others will evaluate them negatively (Watson & Friend, 1970). Fear of negative evaluation arises more in situations where social evaluation can occur, such as job interviews, appointments, or meetings. Being in a crowded environment (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997), being in an environment where behavior is monitored and judged, imagining that the person being watched is someone else, causes anxiety and fear (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). These are individuals who develop beliefs that they will behave incorrectly in an evaluation process and will be evaluated negatively or that they will lose their self-esteem. The individual calculates and predicts how negatively their behavior is evaluated from the environment around them (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). These people constantly evaluate the discrepancy between their behavior and their performance (Christensen et al., 2003). The more the difference between the audience's desired response and the audience's reaction, and the more important the desired behavior is for the person, the more anxiety is experienced (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Therefore, the fear of negative evaluation causes behavior such as avoiding social environments (Watson & Friend, 1970) or not participating actively in the environment, avoiding eye contact, not talking too much, standing outside the group and speaking with a low tone of voice (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

There are few studies in the literature on the fear of negative evaluation. It has been found that, as a result of self-focus, individuals with a great fear of negative evaluation experience an increase in evaluating themselves as worthless and incompetent (Vassilopoulos & Watkins, 2009). Additionally, individuals exhibiting unhealthy perfectionism traits were found to experience more stress due to fear of negative evaluation in a separate investigation (Shafique et al., 2017). Moreover, fear of negative evaluation was identified as a predictor of academic procrastination in a distinct study (Saddler & Buley, 1999). In a separate line of research, low levels of social acceptance are found to predict fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety (Teachman & Allen, 2007).

One basic emotion experienced by an individual, in relation to perfectionist behavior, may be feelings of inferiority. Feelings of inferiority are a driving force that emerge with the belief that the person is not capable enough to overcome the problems they face, does not have sufficient adaptation skills, cannot stand strong against their problems, and help the individual move forward (Adler, 2013, p. 1-16). Reasons such as the birth of an individual with insufficient organs, inability to meet their own needs without the assistance of their parents, inability to exist alone in nature, inability to meet basic needs, such as survival and security, alone create inferiority feelings (Adler, 1927). The individual tries to develop superiority in order to overcome these deficiencies. Despite inferiority feelings, superiority efforts and behavior towards adaptation can be considered healthy. However, according to Adler's theory, factors such as an inability to get rid of the inferiority feelings experienced in childhood, overusing or exerting a high level of superiority effort, or not sharing social interest, reveal the superiority complex and cause problems (Abramson, 2016). The individual tries to compromise the inferiority feelings, may develop unrealistic expectations and reinforces inferiority feelings (Adler, 2013, p. 23). In this sense, internalized inferiority feelings may cause the individual to develop perfectionist personality traits.

In another study, it was found that inferiority feelings are higher in people diagnosed with major depression, panic attacks, agoraphobia, specific phobia, social phobia, substance abuse, and behavioral disorders, and lower in individuals without any psychological disorders (Goodwin, 2003). Similarly, distinct research revealed that it was found that inferiority feelings cause disappointment and are effective in both withdrawal and aggressive behavior (Kenchappanavar, 2012). Furthermore, in different study, it was found that inferiority feelings are negatively correlated to secure attachment, while a positive correlation was found to anxious attachment (Demir, 2017). This situation suggests that students with perfectionist personality traits are at risk.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The university period is a time in which the individual experiences many changes, gains independence, develops new skills, increases social relationships, improves academically, and experiences intense emotions, such as adaptation problems, anxiety, mental fatigue, and hopelessness. Setting goals with perfectionist standards in such a difficult process can adversely affect an individual's entire life. In this study, the aim is to investigate to what extent the fear of negative evaluation and feelings of inferiority experienced by university students during this period predict their perfectionism. In this research, the following question is sought: To what extent does university students' fear of negative evaluation and inferiority feelings predict their perfectionism?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Participants

The study population of the research consists of 36,569 university students that attend various faculties of a state university in Istanbul, Türkiye. Based on the cluster sampling method, 470 people were reached from this population, considering faculties as clusters. Four students who were found to have extreme values during statistical analysis were removed from the data set. The research was conducted with a total of 466 students, of whom 246 were females (52.8%) and 220 were males (47.2%), between the ages of 17 and 35 (SD. 20.86), studying in various faculties.

2.2. Instruments

The Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS)

The Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale was developed by Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate (1990), and the validity and reliability studies of the scale were conducted with the participation of 410 university students. The scale consists of six dimensions: high personal standards; excessive concern over making mistakes; the perception of high parental criticism; the doubting of the quality of one's actions; the perception of high parental expectations; and a preference for order (Frost et al., 1990). The scale consists of thirty-five items and is rated using the five-point Likert-type rating. The scores that can be obtained from the scale vary between 1-175. There is no reverse scoring in the scale. An increase in the score obtained from the scale indicates an increase in unhealthy perfectionism.

The Turkish adaptation of the scale was carried out by Kağan (2018). The validity and reliability studies of the scale were conducted with the participation of 492 university students. The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach Alpha) of the scale was .91, while the subscales vary between .64 and .94. The fifteen-day test-retest correlation was found to be .82 for the entire scale, and between .63 and .82 for the subscales (Kağan, 2018). In this study, the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the FMPS was recalculated and found to be .90. The reliability coefficients of the subscales are the following: excessive concern over making mistakes .85; a preference for order .91; the doubting of the quality of one's actions .73; the perception of high parental expectations .80; high personal standards .75; and the perception of high parental criticism .74.

Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE)

The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE) was developed by Leary (1983) and is a scale that includes emotions against negative evaluation. Its validity and reliability were tested with 350 undergraduate students. The items of the FNE, which consist of twelve items in total, are graded as a five-point Likert type. An increase in the score obtained from the scale indicates an increase in the fear of being evaluated negatively. Certain items in the scale are reverse coded (Leary, 1983).

The scale was adapted to Turkish by Çetin (2010). Unlike its original form, the scale consists of eleven items. The validity and reliability study of the scale was conducted with the participation of 325 university students. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis were used to determine validity. The FNE can be used in both one dimension and two dimensions. Items with concerns about negative evaluation are taken as one dimension, and items without concerns about negative evaluation are taken as the other dimension. The internal consistency coefficient of the FNE (Cronbach Alpha) was .84, the test-retest reliability coefficient was .82, and half test reliability coefficient was found to be .83. The correlation coefficients for subscales were between .37 and .68 (Çetin, 2010). In this study, the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the FNE was recalculated and found to be .84.

Inferiority Feeling Scale (IFS)

The Inferiority Feeling Scale was developed by Akdoğan and Ceyhan (2014). The scale is evaluated as a five-point Likert type. The higher the score, the higher the inferiority feeling. The validity and reliability study of the scale was conducted with the participation of 1016 university students. The scale has three sub-dimensions and twenty items. The dimensions are determined as discouragement, negation of self-value, and useless superiority effort. The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach Alpha) of the IFS was .86 for the entire scale, and .80, .71, and .73 for the sub-dimensions, respectively. The correlation between two applications in test-retest reliability was .88; the Cronbach alpha coefficient of the half-test reliability was .76; the Pearson's correlation coefficient was .71; and the Spearman Brown correlation coefficient was calculated as .83 (Akdoğan & Ceyhan, 2014). In this study, the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was recalculated and found to be .89.

2.3. Process

The research was carried out by Yıldız Technical University Research and Planning Ethical Committee. It was found ethically appropriate with its decision dated 28.02.2019 and numbered 73613421-604.01.02-E.1902280623. Data collection tools to be used in the research were applied to fifty-two students during the lesson, before the data collection phase. The application, which lasted for fifteen minutes, was carried out to test the comprehensibility of the questions in the personal information form and whether there were any missing items in the data set. After pilot implementation, the implementation of the data collection tools was carried out by the researcher in classes in the 2018-2019 academic year, with the necessary legal permission and the approval of the lecturers of the relevant courses. It was announced that the study would be conducted only with those who volunteered, and written consent was obtained from the participants.

2.4. Data Analysis

Standard multiple linear regression analysis was used to analyze the data. In order to examine the correlations between variables, Pearson correlations were calculated and dimensions showing significant correlations were included in standard multiple regression analyzes. Before starting the standard multiple linear regression analysis, to decide whether the data was normally distributed or not, a histogram was inspected. As the results remained between +1 and -1, the data was accepted as normally distributed. Mahalanobis and Cook's Distance tests were used to determine the deviating values from normality values (Büyüköztürk, 2018, p. 99) and four people who showed deviation were excluded from the analysis. The multiple linear regression analysis was checked to see whether there were VIF values of less than .10 or more than 10 in the linearity diagnosis process, and whether relationship values of greater than .70 between the independent variables created multiple correlations (Pallant, 2015, p. 145-166). The tolerance values were determined to be as follows: .85 for preference for order; .71 for doubting of the quality of one's actions; .65 for perception of high parental expectations; .54 for perception of high parental criticism; .52 for high personal standards; and .44 for excessive concern over making mistakes. The VIF values were determined as follows: excessive concern over making mistakes 2.29; high personal standards 1.94; perception of high parental criticism 1.86; perception of high parental expectations 1.54; doubting of the quality of one's actions 1.41; and preference for order 1.20. Since the correlations obtained from the data set were lower, the data was preserved because the VIF and Tolerance values were within the specified range. The data was analyzed using an IBM SPSS 20 package program. The significance level in the study was determined to be at least .05.

3. FINDINGS

The results of the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis, which was conducted to determine the relationships between perfectionism, fear of negative evaluation, sub-dimensions of the inferiority feeling, discouragement, denial of self-worth, and useless striving for superiority in university students are given in Table 1.

Table 1.

Correlation Results Regarding the Relationship between University Students' Perfectionism, Fear of Negative Evaluation, Sub-Dimensions of Inferiority Feelings, Discouragement, Denial of Self-worth, and Useless Superiority Effort

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perfectionism	1				
2. Discouragement	**.46**	1			
3. Negation of Self Value	**.43**	.67**	1		
4. Useless Superiority Effort	**.63**	.51**	.37**	1	
5. Fear of Negative Evaluation	**.42**	.64**	.49**	.44**	1

**p < .01

A significant positive correlation was found between perfectionism and discouragement, and negation of self-worth, and a medium-level correlation with fear of negative evaluation. A significant, positive, high-level relationship was found with useless superiority effort. The results of the standard multiple linear regression analysis, conducted in order to determine whether the fear of being negatively evaluated and the feeling of inferiority in university students are discouraged, self-negation, and the effort of useless superiority predict perfectionism are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Standard Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Results Regarding the Prediction of University Students' Perfectionism by Fear of Negative Evaluation and Feelings of Inferiority

Variables	B	Standard Error	β	t	p	Dual r	Partial r
Constant	42.48	3.08		13.80	.00**		
Discouragement	.04	.18	.01	.19	.85	.01	.01
Negation of Self Value	.84	.21	.19	4.02	.00**	.14	.18
Useless Superiority Effort	2.14	.17	.52	12.70	.00**	.44	.51
Fear of Negative Evaluation	.19	.10	.09	1.93	.05	.07	.09
R= .67	R^2= .45						
($F_{(3.079)}$= 94.20	p= .00						

**p < .01

As can be seen in Table 2, the regression model obtained is found to be significant ($F_{(3.079)}$ = 94.20, *p <.01*). The sub-dimensions of the fear of negative evaluation and the feeling of inferiority, which are independent variables, are discouragement, negation of self-worth, and the useless superiority effort together, explaining 45% of the variance in predicting the perfectionism variable (R = .67; R^2 = .45). The negation of self-value and the effort of useless superiority significantly predicts perfectionism; it was found that fear of negative evaluation and discouragement does not significantly predict perfectionism.

4. RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this study, it was found that fear of negative evaluation and feelings of inferiority explain perfectionism in 45% of university students. It is understood that the feeling of inferiority is a significant predictor of perfectionism, respectively; the useless striving for superiority and the negation of one's own value make an important contribution. When the literature is examined, there are no research results that examine perfectionism, fear of negative evaluation and feelings of inferiority together. When studies on inferiority feelings and perfectionism are examined, parallel results are seen. In a study, it is found that people with unhealthy perfectionism traits experience more inferiority than people with healthy perfectionism characteristics (Ashby & Kottman, 1996). In another study, it was found that people who show perfectionist characteristics about themselves see themselves as inferior (Wyatt & Gilbert, 1998). Aydın (2017) also finds positive and low-level significant correlations between perfectionism and discouragement, negation of self-value, and the effort for useless superiority like features in his study. Individuals experience inferiority feelings with the belief that they do not have enough strength to solve life's problems. They can set high standards and begin to develop perfectionist traits in order to cope with this emotion or to increase their mood.

According to the results of this study, there are positive relationships between perfectionism and the fear of negative evaluation. Similar to the results of this study, there are studies that show a relationship between fear of negative evaluation and perfectionism (Casale et al., 2004; Hamarta, 2009; Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2012; Yap et al., 2016). Although the fear of negative evaluation and perfectionism are positively associated with the results of the study, it can be seen that there is no significant predictor. This finding differs from a number of studies in the literature, and there are studies in which it has been concluded that perfectionism is a predictor of the fear of negative evaluation (Hamarta, 2009). Another study reveals that fear of negative evaluation at the university level plays a mediator role between unhealthy perfectionism and perceived stress (Shafique et al., 2017). Individuals who are afraid of being evaluated negatively, and who have a perfectionist personality, set high standards for themselves. Individuals who fear being evaluated negatively focus on others' evaluations of them. However, focusing on self-evaluations in perfectionism, in other words, focusing on different mental processes, may be effective in not having a significant effect on perfectionism.

In this study, it is found that inferiority feelings and fear of negative evaluation predict perfectionism. Achievement and test-oriented education in schools can be associated with students' inferiority feelings and a fear of negative evaluation. For this reason, the use of educational models that support learning, and aim to evaluate the development of students in the educational process, instead of correct answers, may be preventive in the formation of perfectionism. In addition, psycho-educational studies of adolescents and adults to set realistic goals suitable for their own development, and to develop positive attitudes towards mistakes and positive self-perception, will be useful in coping with inferiority feelings and will be effective in preventing perfectionism. Fear of negative evaluation by origin is accepted as the core of social anxiety (Çetin, 2010), and the feeling of inferiority is also a frequently observed emotion in depression (Beck & Alford, 2009).

In conclusion, it is imperative that the study's limitations be transparently articulated. The correlational nature of the study dictates that a directional or causal relationship cannot be suggested unless supported by a robust theoretical and empirical foundation. The generalizability of the findings are constrained by this inherent limitation, underscoring the importance of acknowledging the boundaries within which this study operates.

As a suggestion for future studies, it would be useful to examine the effects of perfectionism on its formation and progress in life, as variables closely related to psychological disorders, by conducting longitudinal studies. Studies on the fear of negative evaluation are included in the literature as a sub-dimension of social anxiety. Therefore, studies that deal with the fear of negative evaluation separately may be increased and its relationship with other variables could be examined. As the landscape of perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation is navigated, a noteworthy avenue for future exploration involves investigating whether the observed relationship between these variables is more pronounced among students who score higher on measures of feelings of inferiority. Valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics at play could be yielded by understanding how levels of inferiority may moderate the connection between perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation.

The potential analyses that can be conducted hold promise for contributing to the existing literature by shedding light on the underlying mechanisms that give rise to anxiety-inducing variables. By examining the interplay between perfectionism, fear of negative evaluation, and the moderating effect of inferiority, a deeper understanding of how these psychological constructs interact may be gained, providing a more comprehensive picture of the factors influencing individuals' experiences of anxiety and stress in academic settings. Targeted interventions and support strategies aimed at addressing the specific needs of individuals who may be more vulnerable to the impact of perfectionism and fear of negative evaluation could be informed by such insights.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

This research was carried out by obtaining the necessary permissions from Yıldız Technical University Research and Planning Ethical Committee. Ethical principles and rules were taken into consideration in the collection, analysis and reporting of data.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

This research was produced from a part of the first author's master thesis, conducted under the supervision of the second author. The first author conducted the research paper which included performing research activities, data collection, analysis as well as the discussion of the findings. The second author has made a major contribution to the conception, design and reporting of the research and translation of the article.

Statement of Interest

There was no conflict of interest.

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