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Destructive Perfectionism and Protective Factors of Emotional Well-being of University Students

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According to research data, perfectionism scores in the student population are on the rise. The article describes the sociocultural and educational context that causes the revealed trend. Different aspects of perfectionism and their correlation with symptoms of depression and anxiety were examined, and a protective function of self-efficacy and subjectness, which may reduce the negative impact of perfectionism on emotional well-being, was hypothesized. 194 students aged 17 to 25 years ($M=20$), were recruited for this study, 140 of them were female and 54 were male. The following methods were used: Three-factor questionnaire of perfectionism (N.G. Garanyan, A.B. Kholmogorova), Beck Depression Inventory, Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI, 1993), Self-Efficacy Scale (M. Scherer, J. Maddux), “Subjectness Position” questionnaire. It was revealed that subjectness position and closely related self-efficacy are inversely correlated with the indicators of depressive and anxiety symptoms, while destructive perfectionism components (such as socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionist cognitive style) show a direct correlation with the symptoms of emotional maladaptation, the expression of the object position in learning activities and reduced self-efficacy. At the same time, self-oriented perfectionism shows positive links with protective factors, which compensates for its destructive influence. The use of the Sobel criterion to test the mediation model confirmed the hypothesis of a significant mediating effect of self-efficacy on the correlation between perfectionism and depression. It is concluded that it is necessary to carry out preventive measures in higher educational institutions with the implementation of methods of the reflexive-activity approach, which implies the actualization and support of students’ subjectness position.

Keywords: students, perfectionism, emotional distress, self-efficacy, subjectness position, protective factors.

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Деструктивный перфекционизм и факторы-протекторы эмоционального благополучия студентов вузов

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Данные исследований сообщают о возрастании показателей перфекционизма среди студентов. В статье описан социокультурный и образовательный контекст, обуславливающий выявленную тенденцию. Рассмотрены разные аспекты перфекционизма и их связи с симптомами депрессии и тревоги, а также выдвинуто предположение о защитной функции самооффективности и субъектности, которые могут снижать негативное воздействие перфекционизма на эмоциональное благополучие. Выборка включила 194 студента в возрасте от 17 до 25 лет ($M = 20$), из них — 140 женщин и 54 мужчины. Были использованы следующие методики: Трехфакторный опросник перфекционизма (Н.Г. Гараян, А.Б. Холмогорова), шкала депрессии А. Бека, шкала тревоги А. Бека, методика определения общей и социальной самооффективности (М. Шееер, Дж. Маддукс), опросник «Субъектная позиция». Выявлено, что субъектная позиция и тесно связанная с ней самооффективность обратно коррелируют с показателями депрессивных и тревожных симптомов, тогда как деструктивные параметры перфекционизма (такие как социально предписанный перфекционизм и перфекционистский когнитивный стиль) показывают прямую связь с симптомами эмоциональной дезадаптации, выраженностью объектной позиции в учебной деятельности и сниженной самооффективностью. При этом Я-адресованный перфекционизм демонстрирует положительные связи с факторами-протекторами, что компенсирует его деструктивное влияние. Использование критерия Соубела для проверки модели опосредования подтвердило гипотезу о значимом опосредующем влиянии самооффективности на связь между перфекционизмом и депрессией. Делается вывод о необходимости проведения профилактических мероприятий в высших учебных заведениях с реализацией методов рефлексивно-деятельностного подхода, предполагающего актуализацию и поддержку субъектной позиции студентов.

Ключевые слова: студенты, перфекционизм, эмоциональная дезадаптация, самооффективность, субъектная позиция, факторы-протекторы.

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Introduction

There is a trend of increasing perfectionism indicators in the student population in the XXI century, which is associated by many authors with certain trends in modern culture [14; 23]. Perfectionism is a multidimensional personal construct that reflects the desire to achieve high standards and ideals, accompanied by excessive self-criticism, self-demanding and fear of failure and negative evaluation by others. Young people with a high level of perfectionism expect ideal results from themselves and their activities, and expe-

rience pronounced discomfort if they fail to live up to their high expectations.

Perfectionism has been considered for decades as a destructive personality trait leading to emotional maladaptation [3; 14; 17; 20; 21; 23; 25]. However, along with this, researchers have debated whether there are different types of perfectionism — adaptive and maladaptive [14; 25]. To date, researchers have proposed different classifications of it. For example, the classics of perfectionism research P. Hewitt and G. Flett distinguish “Self-addressed perfectionism”, “Socially prescribed perfectionism” and “Socially oriented perfectionism” [22]. Another classic of

this research R. Frost distinguishes the following aspects of perfectionism: “Concern over mistakes”; “Parental expectations”, “Parental criticism”, “Personal standards”; “Organization” and “Doubts about actions” [19]. Russian psychology has also developed an original Three-Factor Perfectionism Questionnaire, which identifies the following components: “Perceived evaluations concerns along with unfavorable social comparisons” (analogous to “Socially prescribed perfectionism”); “High personal standards” (analogous to “Self-addressed perfectionism”); “Negative selectivity and imperfection concentration” or “Perfectionist cognitive style” (close to “Concern about mistakes” and “Doubts about actions”) [4].

Note that the destructiveness of self-addressed perfectionism is questioned in many contemporary studies [14, 25]. Analysis suggests that high standards and demands on oneself are destructive when combined with the so-called perfectionist cognitive style – with persistent thoughts about failures and mistakes, one’s own imperfection, and other negative cognitive distortions characteristic of patients with affective spectrum disorders. Socially prescribed perfectionism reflects the belief that other people expect perfection from the individual, which may or may not correspond to reality. Unlike self-addressed perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism involves adjusting to other people’s expectations at the same time as fear of approaching them and exposing one’s imperfection. The destructiveness of this type of perfectionism is beyond doubt among modern researchers [18; 24].

L.S. Vygotsky introduced the concept of social situation of development, under which he understood the social relations and conditions in which the formation of personality occurs at a particular age or the way in which the social becomes individual [2]. An important characteristic of the social situation of development of modern student youth is very high expectations on the part of society, with constant ratings and assessments of their success.

The growth of demands to oneself is associated, among other things, with the digitalization of society, which creates conditions for constant social comparisons of oneself with other people in social networks [5]. According to Mediascope, more than 40% of the Russian population spends time on social networks and messengers every day, spending on average about 36% of the total time spent on the Internet [1]. Social networks play the role of a mouthpiece, broadcasting the image of a successful person, setting the corresponding values of superiority over other people.

Today, education for young people is a factor in achieving life and professional success, acts as an important competitive advantage in the employment, opens opportunities for career, professional growth, getting a prestigious and highly paid job [13]. This puts considerable pressure on young people, forcing them to strive, compete and meet increasingly high requirements at

school and university in order not to harm their future price in the market of specialists [23].

Within the framework of the reflexive-activity approach to assisting students with learning difficulties, the concept of “subjectness position” was introduced, occupying which a student is both the subject of activity and the subject of its reflection [7, 10]. In this case, the subjectness position towards learning activity is considered as a resource characteristic. In the works of the representatives of this approach it was shown that the subjectness position is positively related to awareness, the use of adaptive coping mechanisms, and the ability to reflect and social cognition, and inversely related to the manifestation of depressive symptoms and problematic use of the Internet [10; 12; 15; 16]. It is important that support and strengthening of the subjectness position even at the younger school age contributes to positive personal and cognitive “steps” in development and increased academic success [6].

A personality possessing the properties of subjectness is capable of reflection, self-development, strives for transformative activity, and is also capable of changing positions and understanding other people [15]. Subjectness position implies conscious, purposeful and active participation of a student in learning activities, rather than passive perception of information. It is possible to promote the development of subjectivity through the support of independent constructive activity of students and their independent decision-making with subsequent reflection of the process of realization of their own ideas [7; 10].

The subjectness position in learning activities can be associated with some aspects of perfectionism, such as high expectations and striving for high standards. A learner in the subjectness position may set challenging goals and strive to achieve them with extra effort and activity. The learner, as a subject of learning activities, will seek additional sources of information, show a research position, and participate in optional activities to cope with the goals set for him/her, which suggests the importance of the construct “subjectness position” in understanding the correlation between education, development, and emotional well-being [9].

Another factor that can act as a “protector” of emotional well-being is self-efficacy. In A. Bandura’s theory of social learning, self-efficacy is considered as a person’s expectation or confidence that he or she is able to carry out those actions that are necessary for him or her to achieve the result [17]. Such confidence in one’s abilities reduces stress levels and promotes emotional well-being and stability, and is negatively related to procrastination and activity avoidance. People who are confident that they are able to control and solve incoming threats do not resort to dysfunctional behavioral strategies, such as various forms of avoidance.

Understanding and studying various aspects of perfectionism and factors that may cause their destructive-

ness or adaptability is necessary to develop effective psychological support and assistance programs for university students. Such programs are designed to develop healthy self-regulation strategies and reduce the negative effects of perfectionism associated with the above-mentioned negative aspects of the social situation of modern youth development.

The objective of the research is to identify the correlation between different aspects of perfectionism, levels of self-efficacy, position in learning activities, and to determine their influence on the severity of symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Research tasks:

1) To determine the correlations of different types of perfectionism with the position in learning activities and the level of students' self-efficacy.

2) To investigate the influence of position in learning activities and the level of self-efficacy and the correlation of various components of perfectionism and the severity of emotional maladjustment.

Method

1. Three-factor perfectionism questionnaire (N.G. Garanyan, A.B. Kholmogorova, 2018). It includes 18 statements that are distributed on three scales: 1) "Perceived evaluations concerns along with unfavorable social comparisons"; 2) "High personal standards"; 3) "Negative selectivity and imperfection concentration". The first scale tests socially prescribed perfectionism, the second scale tests self-addressed perfectionism, and the third scale tests perfectionist cognitive style.

2. Beck Depression Inventory (BDI, adapted by N.V. Tarabrina, 2001).

3. Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI, 1993).

4. Self-Efficacy Scale (M. Scheer, J. Maddux, adapted by A.V. Boyarintseva, 2003). It includes 23 statements distributed on three scales: 1) "General self-efficacy"; 2) "Activity self-efficacy"; 3) "Interpersonal self-efficacy". The results determine the level of subjective belief of the examinee in the potential of his/her strengths in the sphere of subject activity and in the sphere of communication.

5. "Subjectness Position" questionnaire, including questions testing the expression of subjectness, objective and negative position in learning activities (Y.V. Zaretsky, V.K. Zaretsky, I.Y. Kulagina, 2014). The methodology was developed for school students and is currently in the process of validation on a student sample with minor changes in the wording to match the context of higher education. Based on the data obtained, an article on the validation of the methodology is being prepared.

The obtained data were processed using the package of statistical programs SPSS Statistics 23.0 for Windows. Methods of multiple and partial correlation analy-

sis (Pearson criterion), comparison of groups (Mann-Whitney U test), regression analysis (Sobel and Aroyan test) were used. The Sobel and Aroyan criteria were calculated using the program at <http://quantpsy.org>.

Sample

A total of 194 senior and junior students of Moscow universities were surveyed. The study was conducted anonymously in the form of online testing by collecting data through an online questionnaire sent to student groups in social networks. Students were asked to complete a set consisting of a number of techniques. The subjects were informed prior to the study about the intention of the survey and that the study was anonymous and the results would not be disclosed to third parties.

By gender, the subjects were distributed as follows: 140 women and 54 men. The age of the subjects ranged from 17 to 25 years, the average age was 20 years.

The sample consisted of 86 1st year students (44.3%), 27 2nd year students (13.9%), 53 (27.3%) 3rd year students, 16 4th year students (8.2%), 12 5th year students (6.2%). Of these, 146 (75.3%) students study at faculties of natural-science direction, 25 (12.9%) at humanities, 23 (11.9%) students of technical specialties.

Results

Evaluation of the influence of gender showed that female subjects have more pronounced symptoms of depression ($p=0.05$ by Mann-Whitney U test). Comparative analysis of students by course and direction of study shows no significant differences between groups in terms of perfectionism ($0.264 \geq p \leq 0.809$ by Mann-Whitney U test) and factors of emotional well-being: subject position ($p=0.354$) and self-efficacy ($p=0.984$). No other significant differences were found between the male and female sample.

Table 1 shows the data of correlation analysis of the indicators of expression of different types of perfectionism and indicators of emotional maladaptation in the form of symptoms of depression and anxiety. It follows from Table 1 that there is a significant positive correlation between the expression of the general perfectionism rate, its scales "Perceived evaluations concerns along with unfavorable social comparisons" and "Negative selectivity and imperfection concentration" and all manifestations of emotional maladaptation – depressive and anxiety symptoms. The scale "High personal standards" does not reveal significant links with the expression of symptoms of emotional maladaptation, although it registers a statistically insignificant inverse correlation with depressive and anxiety symptoms, i.e. opposite in orientation to the other two subscales of the perfectionism questionnaire.

Table 1

The Correlation between Indicators of Perfectionism and Symptoms of Emotional Maladjustment (N = 194)

Parameters	General perfectionism	Perceived evaluations concerns	High personal standards	Negative selectivity and imperfection concentration
Depressive symptoms	0,502**	0,525**	-0,060	0,496**
Anxiety symptoms	0,406**	0,481**	-0,024	0,326**

Note: “*” – correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$ (Pearson correlation coefficient), “***” – correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.01$ (Pearson correlation coefficient).

As can be seen from Table 2, the general self-efficacy and self-efficacy in subject activity are inversely correlated with all the studied symptoms of emotional maladaptation. Interpersonal self-efficacy is inversely correlated with manifestations of depression, while correlations with anxiety do not reach the level of significance. Subjectness position shows an inverse correlation with the severity of depressive and anxiety symptoms. Object position is directly related to the manifestation of depression. It should be taken into account that all the described correlation coefficients register significant but weak correlations. Negative position to learning activity did not reveal significant correlations with symptoms of emotional maladaptation.

Table 3 summarizes the correlations of indicators of different types of perfectionism and protective factors. The total perfectionism rate correlates inversely with almost all parameters, except for the scales of interpersonal self-efficacy, subjectness, and negative position (where the correlations do not get significant level), there is also a direct significant correlation with object position. However, the correlations with different dimensions of perfectionism are more inter-

esting in this study. Rates of the “High personal standards” (self-addressed perfectionism) are directly and significantly related to total self-efficacy rates, self-efficacy in object activities, and subjectness position. This suggests that high self-efficacy may be based on self-belief in one’s ability to cope with challenging tasks and an active conscious stance in learning activities. The inverse correlation of self-addressed perfectionism with a negative position in learning activities indicates that the desire to master the material and overcome difficulties is not compatible with the denial of the importance of learning. Perfectionist cognitive style (“Negative selectivity and imperfection concentration”) – inversely correlates with the total self-efficacy rate and self-efficacy in subject activity, and directly correlates with the expressed object position. The latter indicates that passive submissive position is associated with insecurity, self-doubt and self-efficacy. Also, the correlations obtained on the scale “Perceived evaluations concerns” (socially prescribed perfectionism) indicate its destructiveness, leading to low self-efficacy and deficit of subjectness and the predominance of the object position in learning.

Table 2

Correlation of Indicators of Self-efficacy and Position in Learning Activity with the Degree of Expression of Emotional Maladjustment (N = 194)

Parameters	General self-efficacy	Activity self-efficacy	Interpersonal self-efficacy	Subjectness position	Object position	Negative position
Depressive symptoms	-0,382**	-0,317**	-0,336**	-0,225*	0,291**	0,130
Anxiety symptoms	-0,169*	-0,174*	-0,069	-0,224*	0,155	0,111

Note: “*” – correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$ (Pearson correlation coefficient), “***” – correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.01$ (Pearson correlation coefficient).

Table 3

Correlations between Perfectionism, Self-efficacy, and Roles in Learning Activities (N = 194)

Parameters	General perfectionism	High personal standards	Negative selectivity and imperfection concentration	Perceived evaluations concerns
General self-efficacy	-0,200**	0,237**	-0,266**	-0,277**
Activity self-efficacy	-0,200**	0,283**	-0,270**	-0,303**
Interpersonal self-efficacy	-0,095	0,001	-0,117	-0,071
Subjectness position	-0,070	0,428**	-0,189	-0,212*
Object position	0,397**	0,099	0,383**	0,336**
Negative position	0,041	-0,350**	0,123	0,178

Note: “*” – correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$ (Pearson correlation coefficient), “***” – correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.01$ (Pearson correlation coefficient).

To assess the role of self-efficacy and subjectness position in learning activities in destructive types of perfectionism and adaptive self-addressed perfectionism, a partial correlation analysis was conducted, excluding the influence of indicators of general self-efficacy and subjectness position on the correlation between the structural components of perfectionism and symptoms of emotional maladaptation (Table 4). Compared to the conducted pairwise correlation analysis (Table 2), the correlation coefficients of general perfectionism, negative selection, and socially prescribed perfectionism decreased when excluding the influence of general self-efficacy and subjectness position indicators, but still remain significant. But it is especially important to emphasize that when excluding the influence of the protectors of emotional well-being (self-efficacy and subjectness position in learning), self-addressed perfectionism began to show a direct correlation with symptoms of depression, although this relationship does not reach the level of significance. That is, high standards without self-confidence and active position in learning activities are destructive for mental health.

Additionally, the Sobel criterion, used in psychological studies to test mediating models of mediation, was used to test the mediating influence of protective factors on the correlations between individual types of perfectionism and symptoms of emotional well-being. The algorithm for calculating this criterion involves the construction of two regression

analysis models. Hypotheses proposed on the basis of the obtained correlations previously confirmed by regression analysis were tested in order to verify and clarify the impact of protector factors on the revealed patterns.

The mediating effect of self-efficacy (total rate) on the relationship between perfectionism (total rate) and depression (total rate) was tested. The result is presented schematically in Figure 1:

The empirical value of Sobel's criterion is 2.463 at $p = 0.013$, $p < 0.05$. The empirical value of Aroyan's statistic is 2.426 at $p = 0.015$, $p < 0.05$. The hypothesis of a significant mediating effect of self-efficacy on the correlation between perfectionism and depression was confirmed.

The multiple regression analysis model reflected the joint effect of perfectionism and self-efficacy on depression, together explaining 32.8% of its variance ($R^2=0.328$).

To clarify the extent to which self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perfectionism and depression, the partial correlation coefficient between these indicators was calculated while controlling for the contribution of self-efficacy. Its value of $r = 0.471$ ($p < 0.001$) is less than the Pearson correlation coefficient ($R=0.502$, $p < 0.001$) reflecting the relationship between perfectionism and depression, while the correlation remains statistically significant. This result suggests that self-efficacy partially mediates the relationship between perfectionism and depression.

Table 4

Correlations between Parameters of Perfectionism and Symptoms of Emotional Maladaptation when Excluding the Influence of Self-efficacy Parameters and Role in Learning Activities (N = 194)

Controlled variables	Parameters	Depressive symptoms	Anxiety symptoms
Subjectness position & Self-efficacy	General perfectionism	0,435**	0,406**
	Negative selectivity and imperfection concentration	0,339*	0,258*
	High personal standards	0,308*	0,199
	Perceived evaluations concerns	0,386**	0,478**

Note: "*" – correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$ (Pearson correlation coefficient), "**" – correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.01$ (Pearson correlation coefficient)..

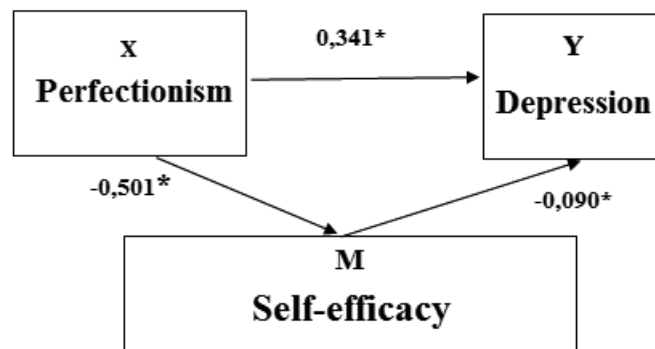


Fig. 1. The mediating effect of self-efficacy on the correlation between perfectionism and depression

Note: "X" – predictor, "Y" – dependent variable, "M" – mediator, "*" – regression coefficients are significant ($p < 0.001$)

Discussion

Inverse correlations between the parameters of subjectness position and self-efficacy with symptoms of emotional maladaptation emphasize the importance of these constructs as protective factors of emotional well-being. Additionally, their protective influence was shown by a partial correlation analysis, which excluded the influence of protector factors on the relationship between the structural components of perfectionism and symptoms of emotional maladjustment. High demands to oneself without self-confidence and expressed subjectness position become destructive for mental health.

Using the mediation model, the effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between perfectionism and depression was confirmed, indicating a significant role of self-efficacy in reducing the negative impact of perfectionism on students' emotional well-being.

The question of possible means of strengthening the considered protector factors becomes relevant. The means of supporting the student's subjectness position and increasing his/her self-efficacy are developed in the reflexive-activity approach as a direction of cultural-historical psychology, which realizes a number of provisions on the relationship between learning, development, and health, as well as the conditions under which learning leads to development [6; 8; 9].

Conclusions

1. Perfectionism and its dimensions such as socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionist cognitive style are strongly associated with symptoms of emotional maladjustment, both depressive and anxious. Whereas self-addressed perfectionism shows positive links with protective factors, which compensates for its destructive effects on emotional well-being. This indicates its relative adaptability. The data correlate with the already obtained results of modern research [18; 20; 24].

2. Subjectness and self-efficacy were identified as protective factors of emotional well-being. They are inversely related to the indicators of depressive and anxiety symptoms and condition the adaptability of self-addressed perfectionism. Destructive perfectionism is associated with the expression of an object position in learning activities and reduced self-efficacy.

3. In order to strengthen the protector factors, the programs are supposed to use the methods of the reflexive-activity approach based on the principles of L.S. Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology. The proposed approach emphasizes the support of the subjectness position in learning activities, providing the student with an important resource for his/her emotional well-being and overcoming learning difficulties.

4. The obtained data can be used by psychological services and teachers of educational institutions for such organization of the process of educational activity, which will contribute to both successful learning and psychological well-being of students.

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