

Does Perfectionism Really “Kill” Creativity? If So, What’s the Alternative?

Description

If you do a Google search for perfectionism and creativity, you’ll notice that there are an awful lot of articles out there suggesting that perfectionism “kills” creativity (who knew perfectionism had such homicidal tendencies...).

I think we probably all know on some level that pursuing excellence is better (at least healthier) than pursuing perfection. But you might be hard pressed to convince a perfectionist that excellence is good enough. At least, I certainly remember a time in my life when excellence felt like settling, and perfect was the only acceptable standard to aim for.

Plus, some perfectionists might rationalize their perfectionism by deciding that they’re the “good” kind of perfectionist rather than the “bad” kind. “Good” perfectionism being where you maintain high standards and strive to meet those standards (aka “perfectionistic strivings”). And “bad” perfectionism being where you’re focused less on high standards and more on avoiding mistakes and worrying about what other people will think of you if you mess up (“perfectionistic concerns”).

And sure, there have been some studies where perfectionistic strivings were associated with more positive characteristics like intrinsic motivation and effort. While perfectionistic concerns are associated with more anxiety, depression, and distress. And there are some studies which suggest that athletes who are high in perfectionistic strivings do tend to outperform athletes who are low in perfectionistic strivings.

But when it comes to creativity, is even this type of perfectionism actually “good?” Like, does having perfectionistic standards contribute something extra, above and beyond aiming for excellence? Or is it true that perfectionism does indeed slaughter, butcher, and maim our creative potential?

Perfectionism vs. excellencism?

There’s been a lot of research done on perfectionism over the years, but surprisingly, there hasn’t been much research on this particular question.

So a team of Canadian researchers ([Goulet-Pelletier et al., 2021](#)) recruited 279 college students and had them complete a range of questionnaires on various aspects of their lives. Like academic motivation and stress management, as well as the degree to which they approached their schoolwork with perfectionism or excellencism.

Essentially they had to respond to questions like “My goal at school is to be very productive” (excellencism) or “My goal at school is to perform perfectly” (perfectionism) or “My goal at school is to be

exceptionally productive all the time” (perfectionism) by rating each on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1=not at all and 7=totally.

A test of creative potential

And then they were asked to complete a commonly-used test of creative potential, where they were given 5 minutes to write down as many creative things they could do with a newspaper, another 5 minutes to generate a list of all of the creative uses they could imagine for a brick, and finally 5 minutes to name all of the things they could think of that make noise.

The researchers counted up the total number of responses each participant generated, and then a pair of judges evaluated the originality of each answer (based on how unusual, remote, or clever the response was).

And then the researchers looked at participants’ perfectionism vs. excellencism scores to see if they were “perfection strivers” (high perfectionism scores/low excellencism scores), “excellence strivers” (high excellencism scores/low perfectionism scores), or “non-strivers” (low on both perfectionism and excellencism).

So was there any difference in creativity scores between students who were more perfection-striving and those who were more excellence-striving?

Results

Indeed there was!

The students who scored high on excellencism and low on perfectionism had significantly higher scores on the test of creative potential. They not only generated more responses to the prompts, but their responses were rated as being more original too.

On the other hand, the students who scored high on perfectionism and low on excellencism, had consistently lower scores on the creativity test. These participants not only generated fewer responses, but the responses that they did come up with were rated as being less original.

And how’d the non-strivers do?

And how did the students who were low in both excellencism and perfectionism do?

Well, their performance was basically the same as the perfectionists.

That’s right – the perfectionists’ performance on this test of creative potential was not any different than the slackers in the group who weren’t even in the habit of aiming for excellence.

So at least when it comes to demonstrating one's creative potential, the study suggests that being the sort of person who pursues excellence leads to better results than being the sort of person who pursues errorless standards of perfection.

And why might this be?

A couple possible reasons why...

Well, the authors propose a few explanations for why excellencism may be more conducive to creative thinking than perfectionism.

For one, perfection-strivers can have a tendency to rely on familiar strategies they already know and use, rather than looking for new and uncertain strategies that might be better, but could also introduce the possibility of slower or less perfect performance. Which can leave them stuck doing the same thing, rather than adapting or being flexible and thinking more creatively.

Previous research suggests that perfection-strivers can also be more self-critical, judgmental, and overly analytical of their ideas. Which can block the natural flow and process of generating new creative ideas. If you've ever tried brainstorming in a situation where you were worried about being criticized, you probably remember how much more difficult it was to focus, be engaged in the task, and generate ideas when a part of you was worried about what other people would say, or how well you were doing, or how much time you had left.

Takeaways

Essentially, the authors note that striving for flawless, perfect performance above and beyond excellence may be counterproductive when it comes to creative tasks. In that perfectionism is likely to limit the amount of "experimentation, spontaneity, and openness" one is willing to make room for.

And sure, while it can feel pretty crappy to mess up or make mistakes, playing it safe and doing things the same way we've always done them isn't much fun either. Making for not just uninspired performances, but a whole lot of dull practice sessions too...

Psst...

Do your students find it difficult to practice consistently, or get frustrated with the gap between what they sound like at home and what happens on stage? If you've been looking for some new research-based tools to help your students practice more effectively, perform more confidently, and experience a wee bit more joy in both, you might be interested in the live, 6-week, semi-annual *Performance Psych Essentials for Educators* class that starts in a couple weeks. Registration opens next weekend – more details [here](#).

References

Goulet?Pelletier, J., Gaudreau, P., & Cousineau, D. (2021). Is perfectionism a killer of creative thinking? A test of the model of excellencism and perfectionism. *British Journal of Psychology*, 113 (1), 176–207. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12530>

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