



## **PERFECTIONISM AND RACIAL IDENTITY AS PREDICTORS OF LIFE SATISFACTION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the relationships among racial identity, perfectionism and life satisfaction in a sample of 122 African American women. The current study found that the pre-encounter status of racial identity was associated with lower life satisfaction. Self-oriented perfectionism was positively associated with life satisfaction while socially prescribed perfectionism was negatively associated with life satisfaction. Implications for assessment and interventions with African American female college students are discussed.

### **Keywords:**

*racial identity, perfectionism, life satisfaction*

### **RESUMEN**

Este estudio examina la relación entre la identidad racial, el perfeccionismo y la satisfacción con la vida en una muestra de 122 mujeres afroamericanas. El estudio encontró que el estado de pre-encuentro de la identidad racial se asoció con una disminución en la satisfacción con la vida. Orientado auto-perfeccionismo se asoció positivamente con la satisfacción con la vida, mientras que el perfeccionismo socialmente prescrito se asoció negativamente con la satisfacción con la vida. Se discuten las implicaciones para la evaluación e intervención de las mujeres afroamericanas.

### **Palabras clave:**

Identidad Racial, el perfeccionismo, la satisfacción con la vida

EL PERFECCIONISMO Y LA IDENTIDAD RACIAL COMO PREDICTORES DE SATISFACCIÓN CON LA VIDA EN MUJERES AFROAMERICANAS QUE SON ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS

Recent research on perfectionism has defined it as a multidimensional construct with adaptive and maladaptive aspects related to varying psychological outcomes (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Despite increased interest in the study of perfectionism and its relationship to psychological adjustment, there have been very few studies examining the correlates of perfectionism using ethnically diverse samples such as African Americans. Additionally, although much research has been done on the maladjustment related to perfectionism, few studies have examined the relationship of perfectionism to positive psychological outcomes.

Additionally, previous research has shown gender differences on several measures of psychological adjustment including stress, coping, depression and self-esteem (Klonoff et al., 2000). This indicates that a consideration of both race and gender are important in getting a clear picture of psychological adjustment related to perfectionism. As such, the purpose of this study is to examine the experience of perfectionism among African American women and how their racial identity and perfectionist tendencies influence their life satisfaction.

The recognition of perfectionism as a multidimensional construct with both positive and negative aspects has allowed researchers to begin looking at the differences between types of perfectionists and the effect that their perfectionism has on psychological functioning. In identifying the multidimensional nature of perfectionism, researchers have worked to clarify the sources of perfectionistic tendencies. Hewitt and Flett (1991) identified perfectionism as having three dimensions: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism describes individuals who are highly self-critical setting extremely high standards for themselves. Other-oriented perfectionism describes individuals' tendencies to have unrealistic standards and a stringent evaluation of performance by others. Socially prescribed perfectionists believe that other people set excessively high standards in regards to them, having the perception that significant

others are evaluating them stringently and exerting pressure on them to be perfect. Research has shown that some of the more maladaptive forms of perfectionism are associated with lower life satisfaction (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009).

Diener et al. (1985) viewed life satisfaction as one component of subjective well-being. Life satisfaction is defined as a cognitive judgmental process in which individuals make comparisons between the current state of their lives and a set of internally defined standards that the person has set for him/herself. Studies examining a multidimensional framework of perfectionism and life satisfaction found that socially prescribed perfectionism was associated with lower life satisfaction (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). However, these studies did not report the race of participants making it unclear as to whether this finding would hold with African American women. Previous studies that have examined cultural issues related to perfectionism have focused on between-group racial differences on dimensions of perfectionism (Castro & Rice, 2003; Chang, Watkins & Banks, 2004) and did not include life satisfaction as an outcome. As noted by multicultural scholars (e.g., Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005), racial categories have no conceptual meaning and, therefore, should not be used to explain psychological phenomena. Helms et al. recommend that researchers replace racial categories with independent variables derived from racial categorization theories, such as racial identity theory, in order to uncover the psychological aspects of participants that racial categories can mask.

According to Helms (1994), there are five ego statuses of racial identity development. Each of the five statuses builds on an individual's understanding of race and guides them in how to interact with the world based on that understanding. The first status, Pre-Encounter, involves a rejection or devaluing of one's own culture and idealization of the majority (White) culture. The second status, Encounter, involves confusion about one's own

culture and the majority culture. This status is marked by the realization, usually due to an unfavorable racial encounter, that the individual will not become an accepted part of the majority culture. The third and fourth statuses are often combined as Immersion/Emersion. Individuals who begin to immerse themselves in their own culture and simultaneously reject the majority culture in the process characterize this status. The last status, Internalization, is characterized by a growing recognition of the contributions of all races, recognition of the oppression experienced by different groups and a drive to promote change. Individuals in this status become more open to other cultures while becoming willing to share about their own.

Few studies have examined the relationship between racial identity and life satisfaction. For example, in a study of 78 African American female college students and 65 African American female non students, Pyant and Yanico (1991) found that the pre-encounter status of racial identity was negatively associated with life satisfaction. More recently, Yap, Settles and Pratt-Hyatt (2011) in a study of 161 African American adults, found that racial identity was positively correlated to life satisfaction.

Exploring racial identity and perfectionism as they relate to life satisfaction is a relatively new area that may contribute to the understanding of how perfectionism affects African American women. A consideration of racial identity may have some important implications in the study of the cultural influences on perfectionism and may guide therapists in working with racial minority groups. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the experience of perfectionism among African American women and how their racial identity and perfectionist tendencies might influence their life satisfaction. We hypothesized that, after controlling for age and education, racial identity status and perfectionism will be significant predictors of life satisfaction.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 122 African American women who were recruited via email and listservs of various university organizations and

directly in university classrooms. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 59 years ( $M=29.02$ ,  $SD=10.52$ ). Approximately 82% of the participants were enrolled in a college or university at the time the survey was completed (52.5% were undergrads, 29.5% were current graduate students, 18.0% were non-students). A preliminary T-test indicated no significant differences between students and non-students on the measures of racial identity, perfectionism and life satisfaction.

### Measures

*Demographic Data:* Demographic data including age, gender, racial or ethnic background, year in academic program, college major or area of concentration and country or state where the participants primarily grew up were collected.

*Racial Identity: The Black Racial Identity Attitude Scale* (Helms & Parham, 1996) is a 30-item 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) that assesses racial identity status for African Americans. The four subscales of this instrument include Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion and Internalization. Prior studies of the RIAS-B's construct validity have found that the encounter status as a separate construct was not supported (Ponterotto & Wise, 1987). Thus, for this study only pre-encounter, immersion/emersion, and internalization statuses were examined. Alpha levels for the current study were Pre-encounter ( $\alpha=.74$ ); Immersion/Emersion ( $\alpha=.66$ ); and Internalization ( $\alpha=.73$ ).

*Perfectionism: The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale* (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) is a 45-item self report instrument that measures perfectionism along three dimensions: self-oriented, other-oriented and socially prescribed. Hewitt and Flett (1991) reported 3 month test-retest reliabilities of .88 for self-oriented perfectionism, .85 for other oriented perfectionism and .75 for socially prescribed perfectionism. Internal consistency analysis in the current study yielded the following alphas: Self Oriented Perfectionism ( $\alpha=.69$ ); Other Oriented Perfectionism ( $\alpha=.65$ ) and Socially Prescribed Perfectionism ( $\alpha=.65$ ).

*Life Satisfaction: The Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, et al., 1985) is a 5-item measure of a person's global life satisfaction. Respondents are asked to rate agreement with these 5 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) on questions such as "In most ways my life is close to ideal." Test-retest (2 month) reliability has been shown to be .82 (Diener, et al., 1985). Internal consistency analysis in the current study is  $\alpha=.86$ .

### Procedure

Individuals were invited to complete an online the survey through an email to listservs of various student organizations on several

campuses. A link to the survey was provided in the invitations along with instructions on how to anonymously submit responses. Individuals who were recruited in person in classrooms were given a paper and pencil version of the questionnaire.

### Results

Means and correlations among study variables are presented in Table 1. To investigate how well racial identity and perfectionism predict life satisfaction after controlling for age and education level, a hierarchical linear regression was conducted (see Table 2).

Table 1

*Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Measures (N =122)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 MPS-Self	—	.45**	.26**	-.10	-.13	.14	.20*
2 MPS-Social		—	.20*	.12	-.05	.18*	-.21*
3 MPS-Other			—	.09	-.23*	-.07	-.14
4 Pre-enc				—	-.49**	-.18*	-.25**
5 Immer/Emer					—	.15	-.17*
6 Intern						—	.03
7 SWL							—
Mean	46.75	55.18	43.80	16.04	14.65	35.31	23.39
SD	7.27	7.49	9.78	5.23	3.88	4.97	7.05
A	.69	.65	.65	.74	.66	.73	.87

Note. MPS-Self=self-oriented perfectionism, MPS-Social=Socially prescribed perfectionism, MPS-Other=other-oriented, Pre-enc= Pre-encounter Immer/Emer=Immersion/Emersion subscale SWL = life satisfaction

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

The full model explained 20% of the variance in the prediction of life satisfaction. Age and education level were not significant predictors of life satisfaction,  $F(2, 117) = 2.127$ ,  $p=.124$ . Racial identity accounted for 8% of the variance predicting life satisfaction, with the pre-encounter status as the most significant predictor ( $\beta = -.25$ ;  $p < .05$ ). The addition of

other-oriented, socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionism in the final block further improved the prediction;  $R^2$  change=.14,  $F(3,111)=6.82$ ,  $p<.001$ . The most significant predictor of the perfectionism block was socially prescribed perfectionism ( $\beta = -.35$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Satisfaction with Life (N=122)

Variable	B	SE B	β
Block 1			
Age	-.09	.07	-.13
Education	1.48	1.88	.08
Block 2			
Age	-.13	.07	-.19
Education	1.22	1.83	.07
Pre-encounter	-.33	.14	-.25*
Immersion/Emersion	-.10	.19	-.06
Internalization	.08	.13	.06
Block 3			
Age	-.11	.07	-.17
Education	.63	1.72	.04
Pre-encounter	-.21	.14	-.15
Immersion/Emersion	-.08	.19	-.05
Internalization	.10	.13	.07
Self-oriented	.33	.09	.34**
Other-oriented	-.11	.07	-.15
Socially Prescribed	-.32	.09	-.35**

\*p<.05. \*\*p<.01

**Discussion**

It is important for psychologists to have an understanding of the multidimensional nature of perfectionism and to understand clients from a cultural perspective. Racial identity can allow for an understanding of African American women from the perspective of how they see themselves within their own culture and in relation to other cultures. The present study sought to explore relationships among racial identity status, perfectionism, and life satisfaction. The results indicated a significant negative relationship between immersion/emersion and other-oriented perfectionism. This finding suggests that individuals in the immersion/emersion status of racial identity are less focused on viewing others as perfect and may display more of an inner focus with less judgment of others.

Results also showed a significant positive correlation between internalization status and socially prescribed perfectionism. This finding suggests that individuals in the internalization status may be concerned about the ability to meet the expectations of others as they strive to be successful in promoting change.

These strivings to meet the expectations of others are consistent with the characteristics of an individual exhibiting socially prescribed perfectionism.

Additional results indicated a significant negative relationship between pre-encounter and immersion/emersion statuses and life satisfaction. This is consistent with previous studies showing a link between pre-encounter racial identity status and decreased general well-being (Pyant & Yanico, 1991). Individuals at the pre-encounter status tend to have a negative view of the African American culture while idealizing the dominant White culture or worldview. In this status, the individual would need to find ways to separate and distinguish him/herself from the culture in order to reconcile the thought that “This group is bad but I am a part of it.” This can lead to feelings of low self-esteem and, as shown in this study, lower life satisfaction.

In immersion/emersion, the individual begins to find value in his/her own racial group and starts to devalue the majority culture’s views (Helms, 1990). According to Yap, Settles and Pratt-Hyatt (2011), when African Americans

believe that other groups view the African American culture favorably, they report more life satisfaction. The immersion/emersion status is viewed as a transitional status where the individual is starting to find more value in his/her own culture but does not believe that other cultures share that belief about the value of the African American culture. Previous research has identified information strategies present in individuals in the immersion/emersion status that may cause individuals to be more sensitive to the perceptions of racism and discrimination and consequently lower life satisfaction (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers & Jackson, 2010). A finding of lower life satisfaction amongst individuals in the immersion/emersion status was also supported in the current study.

It is interesting to note even though pre-encounter status significantly predicted lower life satisfaction when perfectionism was entered into the regression model, it was no longer significant. In the final model, only self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism were significant predictors of life satisfaction, with socially prescribed perfectionism being the most significant predictor. This suggests that participants who experience socially prescribed perfectionism have less life satisfaction. Participants who were in the immersion/emersion status of racial identity and who are perfectionists concerned with the judgments of others may experience significantly low life satisfaction which may benefit from interventions geared towards a greater acceptance and understanding of their own culture.

Although, it is important to note that racial identity status may be an important predictor of life satisfaction, it is also important to consider the cumulative effect of both racial identity and perfectionism on African American women's life satisfaction. Psychologists working with African American women should consider these findings when determining a course of assessment and intervention. Specifically, therapists should help clients to understand how their perfectionistic tendencies and the source of their perfectionism may influence life satisfaction. An understanding by the therapist of the client's cultural world view will give some insight into how the type of

perfectionism along with the racial identity combines to affect life satisfaction. The therapist should work to encourage the more positive aspects of perfectionism such as a drive for success along with a healthy recognition of those successes while encouraging an inclusive worldview and a healthy acceptance of one's own culture. Additionally, the psychologist should help the client to identify the evaluative messages they receive from others and themselves (Rice, Ashby & Presser, 1996) while guiding them towards an evaluative process that includes recognition of their own successes.

Some limitations to the current study include the cross-sectional design of this study and the use of correlations which limit the ability to form causal explanations. Sample size may also be a limitation in that some relationships between variables may not have reached significance due to the small sample size. This also limited the types of analyses that could be performed on this data-set. A larger study using a longitudinal approach in the future may aid in further explanation.

Future studies might consider using a different measure of racial identity focusing less on comparisons to the majority culture and more on gaining an understanding of an internal African American racial identity, which may give a better understanding of strengths that may impact psychological well being. This could give an added understanding of how unique life experiences and protective factors may affect life satisfaction. Future researchers might also include a male sample in order to determine more comprehensively how cultural factors influence perfectionism and life satisfaction.

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