



Perfectionism Moderates the Relationship between Thwarted Belongingness and Perceived Burdensomeness and Suicide Ideation in Adolescents

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Abstract

According to the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, suicide ideation is associated with thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. According to the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model, excessive perfectionism is also considered to be a risk factor for depression and suicide. In the present study, the role of perfectionism as a moderator in the association between interpersonal distress (i.e., perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, low connectedness to parents and friends) and suicide ideation was examined in a nonclinical sample of adolescents. One-hundred and three adolescents were assessed through self-report instruments. Perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness and disconnectedness to parents and friends were found to correlate with suicide ideation. As predicted, perfectionism was found to moderate the relation between these interpersonal distress variables and suicide ideation. Perfectionism augments the association between interpersonal distress and suicide ideation among adolescents. Interventions should consider that adolescents who face interpersonal challenges are particularly at risk if they tend to be highly perfectionist.

Keywords Perfectionism · Suicide ideation · Interpersonal theory of suicide · Adolescence

Introduction

Suicide ideation, i.e. an individual having thoughts about intentionally taking their own life, is not rare in adolescence even in the non-clinical context. According to the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey [1], 17.2% of high school students have “seriously considered attempting suicide” in the last year, and 13.6% had planned how they would attempt suicide. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (IPTs) [2] states that suicide ideation is more likely to arise

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in individuals who experience a combination of perceived burdensomeness and feelings of thwarted belongingness in their significant relationships. Although the association between these interpersonal sources of distress and suicidality has been verified in adolescence [3], there is still a question regarding the augmenting effect of adolescents' personality characteristics on this association. The Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model [4] posits that perfectionism – the individual's striving for perfection – is a trait that may be relevant to this question. According to this model, perfectionism not only has a direct effect on suicidality, but also an indirect effect by creating or increasing the sense of disconnection to the social world. Indeed, perfectionism was found to be an important risk factor for depression and anxiety in children and adolescents [5, 6]. However, as far as we know, there are no studies that have examined the effect of the interaction between perfectionism and perceived burdensomeness and feelings of thwarted belongingness on suicide ideation in adolescence. The question that served as starting points for the present study was: How does perfectionism intervene in the relationship between interpersonal distress and suicide ideation in adolescents?

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide in Adolescence

According to the IPTS [2], suicide ideation is associated with thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. A third factor, i.e., acquired capability of self-harm, explains the transition from ideation to suicidal acts. In the last two decades, the theory has been tested mostly on adult samples, receiving broad empirical support [7–9]. However, a recent review suggests that the theory's predictions regarding perceived burdensomeness are more consistently supported than those regarding thwarted belongingness [10]. Regarding the validity of the IPTS with adolescents, a recent review [11] has led its authors to conclude that the IPTS advances the understanding of suicidal behavior in adolescence; however, it might be useful to examine it in the context of moderator variables. In the present study, perfectionism was explored as potential moderator variable.

Perfectionism and Suicide Ideation in Adolescence

Perfectionism is regarded as a multidimensional personality trait that involves striving for perfection, setting remarkably high standards, and granting excessively critical evaluations [12, 13]. In their original model [13], Hewitt and Flett conceptualized perfectionism as encompassing three components: (a) self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., one's self-prescribed requirement to be perfect); (b) other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., one's requirement for others to be perfect); and (c) socially-prescribed perfectionism (i.e., others' perceived requirement that one should be perfect). However, in adolescence perfectionism is best conceptualized as containing only two of these dimensions: self-oriented and socially-prescribed perfectionism [14]. Hence, the Child and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS) [15] was designed to capture these two types of perfectionism.

Perfectionism can be adaptive, inducing high standards of performance, motivation, and achievements [16, 17]. However, when a person is excessively self-critical it may impact his well-being and heighten his vulnerability to various psychological disorders, including depression and anxiety [18].

The relationship between perfectionism and suicide in children and adolescents has not received much empirical attention. However, several studies have found that in children and adolescents, perfectionism is associated with depression [5, 6, 19]. Moreover, several studies have consistently demonstrated that among adolescents, perfectionism is associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors [14, 20–24].

The Present Study

The available literature indicates that interpersonal distress and perfectionism are each relevant in explaining variance in suicide ideation. However, as far as we are aware, no studies have yet examined the interaction between these factors in adolescence. Therefore, in the present study, we examined the moderating role of perfectionism on the relationships between adolescents' perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation. In addition, thwarted belongingness was examined separately in the relationships of adolescents with their parents and friends, by using the similar construct of connectedness [25].

The following hypotheses were tested: (a) Perceived burdensomeness will be positively associated with suicidal ideation; (b) Feeling of thwarted belongingness and lower connectedness to family or friends will be positively associated with suicidal ideation; (c) Perfectionism will moderate the relationship between perceived burdensomeness and suicidal ideation, i.e., the relationship between perceived burdensomeness and suicidal ideation will be stronger among adolescents who report higher levels of perfectionism; and (d) Perfectionism will moderate the relationship between feeling of thwarted belongingness and suicidal ideation, i.e., the relationship between feeling of thwarted belongingness and suicidal ideation will be stronger among adolescents who report higher levels of perfectionism. Hypotheses 3 and 4 were tested separately for both types of perfectionism, i.e. socially-prescribed and self-oriented perfectionism, in order to examine whether they function differently in the model. Hypotheses 4 was tested by referring to thwarted belongingness as measured in the context of the IPTS, as well as to feelings of connectedness in the relationship with parents and friends.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. The sample was based on 103 adolescents (44.7% male, 55.3% female) aged 12–18 ($M = 15.5$, $SD = 1.76$) who were recruited in informal youth settings in a central city in Israel. They were studying in regular schools (9th to 12th grade). A research assistant approached potential participants and invited them to participate in the study. Most of them (93%) reported being born in Israel. Exclusion criteria included studying in the special education system, being treated with psychiatric medication, or living away from home. All participants and their parents received a written and oral explanation of the study and signed an informed consent form prior to participation. After completing their participation, all participants were debriefed.

Instruments

Paykel Suicide Scale (PSS) [26]

The adapted and validated version [27] was used to assess suicide ideation. Only the four first items were used, while the fifth item, which assesses actual suicide attempts, was omitted. Participants were asked to report passive and active suicidal thoughts during the last two weeks. Items were rated on a 5-point scale (0 = never; 5 = all the time). For the present study, the internal consistency index was good ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Child and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS) [15]

This 22-item scale was designed to assess two types of perfectionism in children and adolescents: socially-prescribed (e.g., there are people in my life who expect me to be perfect) and self-oriented perfectionism (e.g., I try to be perfect in everything that I do). Participants were asked to rate each item on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all true of me; 5 = very true about me). Reliability indices in the present study were acceptable for both socially-prescribed and self-oriented perfectionism ($\alpha = .79, .77$ respectively).

Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire (INQ) [28]

This 15-item questionnaire assesses concepts derived from the interpersonal theory of suicide (Joiner, 2005). Nine items measure feelings of belongingness (e.g., these days, other people care about me) and six items measure perceived burdensomeness (e.g., these days, the people in my life would be happier without me). Items are rated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all true for me; 7 = very true for me). Reliability indices in the present study were good for both belongingness and burdensomeness ($\alpha = .80, .85$ respectively).

The Hemingway: Measure of adolescent connectedness [29]

The original questionnaire was developed to assess the connectedness of adolescents to significant people and places in various contexts. In previous studies that were conducted in the context of the interpersonal theory of suicide, this instrument was used in order to assess belongingness [e.g., 3]. For the purpose of the present study, only two scales were analyzed: connectedness to parents and connectedness to friends. Reliability indices in the present study were acceptable for both scales (parents: $\alpha = .79$, friends: $\alpha = .82$).

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants were asked to report their age, gender, grade, and religion. They were also asked to report whether they were being treated with psychiatric medication, whether they were studying in the special education system, or living away from home.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were conducted to examine the distribution of study variables. Bivariate correlations were computed to examine the association between the predictor variables, assumed moderators, and the outcome variable. Then, regression analyses with the modprobe extension [30, 31] were conducted to probe significant interactions between perfectionism and the IPTS variables, with +1 standard deviation representing more perfectionism, and –1 standard deviation representing less perfectionism. This approach allowed to further understand the moderation effects of perfectionism, by estimating the effects of thwarted belongingness, burdensomeness, and connectedness on suicide ideation at different levels (i.e., lower and higher levels) of self-inscribed and social-oriented perfectionism.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Analyses

The descriptive statistics of suicidal ideation, perceived burdensomeness thwarted belongingness, connectedness and perfectionism for boys, girls, and the total sample are presented in Table 1. No significant differences were found between boys and girls for all of the study variables.

The bivariate correlations between the variables are presented in Table 2. According to our hypotheses, both variables of the IPTS, i.e., thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness were positively correlated with suicide ideation. In addition, significant associations were found between feelings of connectedness to parents and friends and suicide ideation. Specifically, adolescents who reported lower levels of connectedness within each of these two contexts reported higher levels of suicide ideation. The findings also reveal no significant associations between perfectionism and suicide ideation, although significant correlations were found between socially-prescribed perfectionism and perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the variables for boys, girls and the total sample

Measure	Total (<i>n</i> = 103)		Boys (<i>n</i> = 46)		Girls (<i>n</i> = 57)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Suicide ideation	0.99	2.53	0.76	2.75	1.18	2.34
Perfectionism (Total score)	63.47	12.60	62.28	12.67	64.42	12.56
Socially-prescribed perfectionism	26.30	6.93	26.13	7.05	26.44	6.90
Self perfectionism	37.17	7.21	36.15	6.96	37.98	7.37
Perceived burdensomeness	7.95	4.00	7.80	3.88	8.07	4.13
Thwarted belongingness	23.03	9.50	22.17	8.07	23.72	10.54
Connectedness to parents	4.17	0.62	4.16	0.65	4.17	0.61
Connectedness to friends	4.22	0.68	4.08	0.73	4.34	0.62

Table 2 Bivariate correlations matrix for variables in the study

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Suicide ideation	1.00						
2. Perfectionism (total)	.12	1.00					
3. Socially-prescribed perfectionism	.10	.88 ***	1.00				
4. Self-oriented perfectionism	.11	.89 ***	.58 ***	1.00			
5. Perceived burdensomeness	.57 ***	.14	.22 *	.03	1.00		
6. Thwarted belongingness	.32 ***	.14	.20 *	.05	.45 ***	1.00	
7. Connectedness to parents	-.33 ***	-.14	-.25 **	.01	-.54 ***	-.46 ***	1.00
8. Connectedness to friends	-.29 **	-.03	-.02	-.03	-.36 ***	-.61 ***	.32 ***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Moderation Analyses

Socially-Prescribed Perfectionism

In order to examine whether socially-prescribed perfectionism moderates the relationship between the four independent variables (i.e., perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, connectedness to parents, connectedness to friends) and suicide ideation, four separate Regression analyses were performed. As expected, a significant interaction between perceived burdensomeness and socially-prescribed perfectionism was found ($t = 2.28$, $p < .05$). Specifically, no significant relationship between perceived burdensomeness and suicide ideation was found in the lower level of perfectionism ($B = .16$, $t = 1.60$, ns), but a significant relationship was found between these variables in the higher level of perfectionism ($B = .45$, $t = 7.04$, $p < .001$). Therefore, socially prescribed perfectionism was found to moderate the relationship between perceived burdensomeness and suicide ideation, such that the association between perceived burdensomeness and suicide ideation is apparent only in the higher levels of perfectionism.

The interaction between thwarted belongingness and socially-prescribed perfectionism was not significant ($t = .52$, ns). However, the findings differed in both levels of socially prescribed perfectionism, implying that it moderates this relationship. Specifically, the relationship between thwarted belongingness and suicide ideation in the lower level of socially prescribed perfectionism was not significant ($B = .07$, $t = 1.69$, ns), while a significant positive relationship was found between these variables in the higher level of socially prescribed perfectionism ($B = .09$, $t = 2.73$, $p < .01$). Therefore, socially prescribed perfectionism appears to moderate the relationship between thwarted belongingness and suicide ideation, such that the association between thwarted belongingness and suicide ideation is apparent only in the higher levels of socially prescribed perfectionism.

No significant interaction between connectedness to parents and socially-prescribed perfectionism was found ($t = -.76$, ns). However, when perfectionism was divided to lower and higher levels, a tendency towards moderation was found. Specifically, in the lower level of perfectionism, the association between connectedness to parents and suicide ideation was not significant ($B = -.80$, $t = -1.02$, n.s), whereas in the higher level of perfectionism, a significant negative association was found ($B = -1.53$, $t = -3.12$, $p < .01$). These finding imply that according to our assumption, the association between connectedness to parents and suicide ideation varies in different levels of socially-prescribed perfectionism.

Regarding connectedness to friends, the analysis revealed a significant interaction between connectedness to friends and socially-prescribed perfectionism ($t = -2.66$, $p < .01$). The relationship between connectedness to friends and suicide ideation was not significant in the lower level of perfectionism ($B = -.29$, $t = -.65$, ns). However, this relationship was significant in the higher level of perfectionism ($B = -1.98$, $t = -4.06$, $p < .001$), such that among adolescents with higher levels of perfectionism, lower levels of connectedness to friends were associated with relatively higher levels of suicide ideation. These findings support the assumption regarding the moderating role of socially-prescribed perfectionism in the relationship between thwarted belongingness in adolescents' relationships with friends and suicide ideation.

Self-Oriented Perfectionism

The analyses regarding self-oriented perfectionism produced similar results. A significant interaction between perceived burdensomeness and self-oriented perfectionism was found ($t = 5.39$, $p < .001$). Specifically, no significant relationship between perceived burdensomeness and suicide ideation was found in the lower level of self-oriented perfectionism ($B = .09$, $t = 1.47$, ns); however, a significant relationship was found between these variables in the higher level of self-oriented perfectionism ($B = .66$, $t = 9.15$, $p < .001$). Therefore, we found that self-oriented perfectionism moderates the relationship between perceived burdensomeness and suicide ideation, such that the association between perceived burdensomeness and suicide ideation is apparent only in the higher levels of self-oriented perfectionism.

The interaction between thwarted belongingness and self-oriented perfectionism was not significant ($t = .39$, ns). In this case, the findings showed that self-oriented perfectionism does not moderate this relationship. Specifically, in the lower level of self-oriented perfectionism, the relationship between thwarted belongingness and suicide ideation was close to significant ($B = .07$, $t = 1.84$, $p = .06$), and in the higher level of self-oriented perfectionism, a significant positive relationship was found between these variables ($B = .09$, $t = 2.48$, $p < .05$). Therefore, it appears that self-oriented perfectionism does not moderate the relationship between thwarted belongingness and suicide ideation.

The interaction between connectedness to parents and self-oriented perfectionism was not significant ($t = -1.35$, ns). However, when both levels of self-oriented perfectionism were analyzed, no significant relationship between connectedness to parents and suicide ideation was found for the lower level of self-oriented perfectionism ($B = -.75$, $t = -1.33$, ns), but a significant relationship was found between these variables in the higher level of self-oriented perfectionism ($B = -1.75$, $t = -3.58$, $p < .01$). Therefore, self-oriented perfectionism moderates the relationship between connectedness to parents and suicide ideation, such that the association between connectedness to parents and suicide ideation is displayed only in the higher levels of self-oriented perfectionism.

A significant interaction was found between connectedness to friends and self-oriented perfectionism ($t = -3.35$, $p < .01$). No significant relationship between connectedness to friends and suicide ideation was found in the lower level of self-oriented perfectionism ($B = -.52$, $t = -.37$, ns); however, a significant relationship was found between these variables in the higher level of self-oriented perfectionism ($B = -2.44$, $t = -4.58$, $p < .001$). In other words, only in the higher levels of self-oriented perfectionism, lower levels of connectedness to friends were associated with higher levels of suicide ideation.

Discussion

The present study examined the association between interpersonal distress and suicide ideation in adolescents, and the moderating effect of perfectionism on these associations in a sample of adolescents drawn from a non-clinical population. As far as we know this is the first time in which this moderation effect of perfectionism was investigated. As expected, the IPTS variables, i.e., perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, as well as lower connectedness – to parents and friends – were all associated with higher levels of suicide ideation. These findings are consistent with other studies that support the validity of the IPTS in adolescence [3, 11, 32], as well as other studies that have shown the importance of the parent-child connectedness [33] or the quality of relationships with peers [34] as predictors of suicide ideation among adolescents.

Perfectionism was not correlated with suicide ideation in our sample. However, the findings revealed that both sources of perfectionism (i.e., socially prescribed and self-oriented) clearly moderate the relationship between perceived burdensomeness and suicide ideation, and that socially-prescribed perfectionism also moderates the relationship between thwarted belongingness and suicide ideation. In addition, they both clearly moderate the inverted relationship between connectedness to friends and suicide ideation, and tend to moderate the inverted relationship between connectedness to parents and suicide ideation. Moreover, among adolescents with low perfectionism, experiences of lower connectedness to friends and parents were not significantly associated with suicidal thoughts. These findings imply that interpersonal distress is associated with suicidal thoughts to a larger extent among adolescents who are highly perfectionist. In line with other studies that found that suicidal adolescents in the community report elevated levels of perfectionism [35, 36], our findings regarding the moderator role of perfectionism indicate that perfectionism might be destructive, being a significant risk factor for suicide ideation among adolescents, particularly those who experience interpersonal distress. These conclusions are in line with the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model [4], that suggests that perfectionism is an important factor that may have not only a direct but also an indirect effect on suicidality by creating or increasing the sense of disconnection to the social world.

The important question to answer, however, is how perfectionism interferes to augment the association between interpersonal distress and suicidal ideation. One possible answer might rely on findings showing that perfectionists tend to construct a stressful environment and lack adaptive coping strategies when dealing with stress [18]. Another answer might be that when a perfectionist individual feels unaccepted or unloved by his significant others, it may reinforce negative self-perception and the notion that life is not worth living. This explanation is compatible with other findings which show that the specific self-criticism aspect of perfectionism is strongly correlated with suicidality [21]. A third possible explanation is that perfectionists are less willing to seek help when facing stressful situations, because they may feel that seeking help is sign of failure or of not being perfect [37]. These explanations should be further studied in order to more clearly understand the role of perfectionism in augmenting the effects of other suicide risk factors.

It should be noted that the present study has several limitations. First, the sample size was limited. Second, the present study relied on a single measure of connectedness to parents and friends. Future studies may include more measures that assess the social world of adolescents, such as quality of relationship with parents, and quantity and

quality of friendships. Third, as the study was based on self-report measures, it is difficult to tell whether the same results would be replicated when using observational measures of adolescents' parents or teachers. Finally, all the analyses were based on data collected concomitantly, producing correlational findings; thus, it is impossible to determine the causal relations between the variables.

Despite these limitations, our findings suggest that adolescents who face interpersonal challenges are particularly at risk if they tend to be highly perfectionist. The present findings support the need to include perfectionism in the evaluation of adolescents' suicide risk, and to target perfectionism in preventive and therapeutic programs involving children and adolescents, as proposed by Flett et al. [36]. Specifically, psychotherapeutic interventions are needed with those adolescents who feel that they need to be perfect to be loved, in order to explore and modify their assumptions regarding themselves and their relationships with others.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Eliane Sommerfeld declares that she has no conflict of interest. Shahar Malek declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants (adolescents and parents) included in the study.

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