Revisiting perfectionism in high-level ballet:

A longitudinal collective instrumental case study

Sanna M. Nordin-Bates
Martin Aldoson
Charlotte Downing

Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, Stockholm, Sweden
Abstract

Using a case study design, we explored two ballet dancers’ perfectionism experiences via interviews and questionnaires at two time points, five years apart. They represented the two types of “pure perfectionism” in the 2x2 model of perfectionism (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010): a female representing pure personal standards perfectionism (pure PSP; high perfectionistic strivings, low perfectionistic concerns) and a male representing pure evaluative concerns perfectionism (pure ECP; low perfectionistic strivings, high perfectionistic concerns). The pure PSP dancer reported stable perfectionism across time, seemingly resilient to any perfectionistic concerns developing. She attributed this to her stable, grounded personality, also reporting autonomous motivation and performance success. The dancer representing pure ECP reported increased perfectionistic strivings and lowered perfectionistic concerns over time; concurrently, his motivation became less controlled and more autonomous. He described the reasons in terms of improved basic psychological needs satisfaction and personal growth. Overall, autonomy might be important in mitigating perfectionism.
Revisiting perfectionism in high-level ballet: A longitudinal collective instrumental case study

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality disposition with the potential to impact nearly every aspect of the experiences that people have in performance domains such as sport and dance. It comprises two higher-order dimensions: perfectionistic strivings (PS) and perfectionistic concerns (PC; Stoeber & Otto, 2006), where PS represents a persons’ striving toward flawlessness via such avenues as establishing and striving for extremely high performance standards. PC comprises very critical self-evaluations and doubts about one’s abilities and performances, including negative reactions to imperfection. Because PS and PC are strongly and positively correlated, it is relatively unusual to have high PS without at least moderately high PC, or vice versa (Hill et al., 2020; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Being more perfectionistic has been shown to relate meaningfully with several different outcomes, some more favorable than others. However, when PS and PC have been analyzed independently, no positive outcomes of PC have been identified; instead, PC is associated with negative outcomes such as unhealthy motivation, burnout, and disordered eating (for a review see Hill et al., 2020). Research about PS is more divergent and ambiguous (Hill et al., 2020); specifically, PS appears to be related to neutral, positive (e.g., self-confidence) and negative outcomes (e.g., ill-being). It is of interest, therefore, to understand more about when, how, and for whom PS leads to positive vs. negative outcomes, so that better recommendations for practice can be made in the future.

There is often a strong drive toward perfection in the way dancers, especially classical ballet dancers, are trained and expected to perform; accordingly, perfectionism is at least somewhat common in this domain (e.g., Nordin-Bates & Abrahamsen, 2016; Nordin-Bates et al., 2011; Pickard, 2015). This has led to a growing interest in the potential implications of perfectionism among dancers. For instance, studies have shown that a certain degree of PS can drive dancers to practice more and invest more time in dance, in turn
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supporting performance success (Hill et al., 2015; Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021; Nordin-Bates & Abrahamsen, 2016). However, these same investigations also highlight that (very) high degrees of PS might lead to negative outcomes such as overtraining and inhibited creativity.

To better understand the complex interplay between PS and PC, as well as their potential outcomes, Gaudreau and Thompson (2010) developed the 2x2 model of perfectionism. By combining high and low levels of each of PS and PC, the model outlines three types of perfectionism, as well non-perfectionism. The strong and positive correlation between PS and PC makes *mixed perfectionism* (high PS, high PC) the most common perfectionism type. Similarly, the combination of low PS and low PC (*non-perfectionism*) is common. The other two perfectionism types are more unusual; these are known as *Pure Personal Standards perfectionism* (pure PSP; high PS, low PC) and *Pure Evaluative Concerns perfectionism* (pure ECP; low PS, high PC). The authors of the 2x2 model of perfectionism proposed that pure ECP should relate to the most negative outcomes when compared to other perfectionism subtypes (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010). As for pure PSP, the model authors proposed that while it might relate to the most positive outcomes, it might also be less adaptive than non-perfectionism.

Numerous studies in sport and dance have confirmed that pure ECP is associated with the most negative outcomes. Indeed, the authors of an extensive review of this literature concluded that it was “extremely problematic” (Hill et al., 2020). Pure PSP, on the other hand, is associated with better outcomes than either pure ECP or mixed perfectionism. Still, some inconsistencies in this literature suggest that pure PSP might still be problematic in the long term; for instance, it might be positive when goal progress is perceived to be good, yet negative when things do not go well (Hill et al., 2020). We previously used strategic selection in line with the 2x2 model to gain insights about the experience of perfectionism among high-level dancers representing each perfectionism type (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021). A dancer
representing pure ECP seemed uncertain, doubtful and had a negative view of mistakes; he displayed little self-regulation and often sought approval from others. A dancer representing pure PSP was characterized as highly driven, task-oriented, highly self-regulating and with a positive view of mistakes.

Notably, we identified only one participant for each type of pure perfectionism; others have similarly struggled to identify pure PSP performers (Sellars et al., 2016). In a study with youth athletes, pure PSP ($n = 15$) and pure ECP ($n = 7$) were both less prevalent than the other two subtypes (non-perfectionism $n = 26$; mixed perfectionism $n = 38$; Mallinson-Howard et al. 2018). This rarity has likely contributed to the lack of study of pure perfectionism. For the present study, we re-visited the dancers representing pure perfectionism in our previous study (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021) to further our understanding of their perfectionism. Because pure ECP is considered highly problematic, and pure PSP might become problematic over time (e.g., in response to difficulties; Hill et al., 2020), we were especially interested in the long-term experiences of these pure perfectionism cases.

Despite the identified risks of perfectionism, relatively few studies have examined how it develops. The studies which do exist highlight the importance of contextual influences such as from school (Speirs Neumeister, 2004) and sport (Appleton & Curran, 2016; Madigan et al., 2019). Indeed, coaches can exert stronger influences on perfectionism than parents for young high-performing athletes (Madigan et al., 2019). To date, there are no studies focused on perfectionism development in dance. Most studies into perfectionism in sport and dance are also cross-sectional or short-term longitudinal (e.g., 6 months; Madigan et al., 2019). Longer-term studies with young people are likely to be valuable, because personality development is pronounced in adolescence (Branje et al., 2007). For high-level performers, adolescence typically also coincides with intensified training: for instance, elite ballet students
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typically increase their training to six days per week during this time, and audition for pre-
professional school.

Several studies have used self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) as a
framework to understand perfectionism, and it may also advance our understanding of
perfectionism development. Specifically, perfectionism might be affected by the support or
frustration of three basic psychological needs proposed in SDT as important for optimal
functioning (e.g., Haraldsen et al., 2019; Haraldsen et al., 2020; Jowett et al., 2021; Mallinson
& Hill, 2011; Nordin-Bates, 2020). These needs include autonomy (acting in line with one’s
true self), relatedness (sense of meaningful belonging) and competence (feeling able to
achieve desired outcomes; Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, perfectionism might develop
when needs are frustrated in controlling environments (e.g., extremely strict instructors with
very high expectations; Nordin-Bates, 2020). Other recent research suggests that controlling
coach behaviors (e.g., conditional regard) can be part of so-called perfectionistic climates,
which are thought to nurture perfectionism development (Grugan et al., 2021). Similarly,
professional dancers and musicians in one qualitative study described how competence
frustration manifested in perfectionistic tendencies (Haraldsen et al., 2020).

SDT further stipulates that performers are likely to display controlled forms of
motivation when basic psychological needs are frustrated (Deci & Ryan, 2013; Ryan & Deci,
2000). This includes being driven by external motivators such as avoiding punishment or
seeking approval. In contrast, performers are more likely to participate for autonomous (self-
determined) reasons when needs are satisfied; this includes being driven by intrinsic
motivation (e.g., meaning, enjoyment, love). SDT organizes different motivational regulations
on a spectrum from controlled to autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2013), and where
one places on this spectrum is determined by the degree to which goals, values and motives
have been internalized.
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The authors of the 2x2 model of perfectionism (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010) used SDT to hypothesize about the potential outcomes of different perfectionism types. In particular, they proposed that pure PSP should be associated with better outcomes than the other types because it represents internalized motives (i.e., pure PSP performers strive for perfection in a self-determined way). Conversely, pure ECP should be associated with the worst outcomes because it represents the least internalized motives. Against this backdrop, we used SDT alongside the 2x2 model of perfectionism in an attempt to understand perfectionism development in dance.

In summary, the aim of this study was to examine the experiences of two high-level dancers representing pure PSP and pure ECP, respectively. As part of this aim, we considered whether, and in what ways, perfectionism may have developed over a five-year period in relation to contextual and motivational influences.

**Method**

**Study Design**

This study includes two cases over a longer period of time with the aim of understanding phenomena extending beyond the specific cases. This makes it a longitudinal collective instrumental case study (Mills et al., 2009). As is suitable when studying relatively unknown study areas, phenomena or behaviors (e.g., in what way, if any, the participants’ perfectionism changed over time), the study was exploratory (Yin, 2009). We adopted a social constructionist approach, whereby we acknowledge that the study is not free from potential biases and that the findings cannot be objectively or universally “true” (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This approach provides room for multiple constructions of reality, which is valuable for understanding perceptions and stories from different individuals.

**Recruitment**

The two participants in this study were initially recruited as part of a previous investigation (Nordin-Bates, 2020; Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021). Because recruitment and
initial data collections (first questionnaires and interviews) are described in full in these previous papers, they are only briefly outlined here.

Recruitment was done via strategic selection in two steps. First, 77 dancers ($M = 15.52$ years, $SD = 2.30$, 77% women) from a nationally recruiting ballet school completed the Multidimensional Inventory of Perfectionism in Sport (MIPS; Stoeber et al., 2006). The MIPS is a 10-item questionnaire scored from 1-6 where $1 = never$ and $6 = always$. Dancers scoring above and below the 20th and 80th percentiles for PS and PC were identified and recruited for interview ($n = 8$), one representing pure PSP and one representing pure ECP. For the present study, an opportunity arose to contact these two participants again, and this was done via social media and personal contacts. Both agreed to participate. They were given information both in writing (in an initial email/social media message and subsequently via an information sheet) and verbally (at the start of the agreed Zoom meeting). They also provided renewed written informed consent.

**Participants**

The two ballet dancers in this study are called, by pseudonym, Elis and Petra. Elis was 12 years old at the time of the first interview (2015), nearing the end of his third year in vocational ballet school. Reporting somewhat low PS ($M = 2.80$) and moderately high PC ($M = 4.00$), he was seen as representing pure ECP. Petra was 18 years old and in her final term of ballet school at the time of the first interview. Reporting high PS ($M = 5.60$) and low PC ($M = 2.0$), she was seen as representing pure PSP. At the time of the present investigation (2020), Elis was 17 years old and approaching his final year of ballet school. He subsequently graduated and obtained a professional contract in a well-recognized ballet company. Petra was 23 years old and had been continuously employed in well-recognized ballet companies since graduation. She gained promotion to soloist (the second-highest rank in a ballet company) after the second interview. It is possible that Petras’ responses in the second
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interview may have been coloured by her success; for Elis, the time of the second interview was still a time of uncertainty regarding job prospects.

Procedure

The study was conducted in line with the ethical regulations of the study country, with data collections taking place in 2015 and 2020. Interview guides facilitated all interviews by providing a flexible structure. The same guide was used for all dancers in 2015, asking about their views on and experiences of perfectionism, including in-depth probing about both PS and PC. In 2020, similar questions were included to enquire about participants’ present-day perfectionism. Additionally, we presented excerpts from each participant’s first interview, letting them reflect on their previous opinions, thoughts and feelings as well as their perceptions of any changes (i.e., an elicitation technique; Johnson & Weller, 2002). In 2015, interviews were held live and lasted 133 (Elis) and 137 minutes (Petra). In 2020, interviews were held via Zoom and lasted 99 (Elis) and 114 minutes (Petra). Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim.

Data-Analytic Strategies

As the purpose of the analysis was to identify repeated patterns that contained some form of meaning in relation to the study purpose, data were analyzed via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) using NVivo 10. In line with recommendations, the early stages of analysis were data-driven via an inductive approach to coding (approx. phases 2-3; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Later on, theoretical concepts (primarily from SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) were introduced and discussed at length among the authors to conceptualize and organize our findings (i.e., a deductive approach in approx. phases 4-5; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Rigor

Several different techniques were used to strengthen the rigor of our study. First, the lead author, who has many years’ experience of working with high-level dancers, conducted
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Both interviews which helped build good rapport. Second, two authors (with different backgrounds in dance and performance psychology) collaborated in the thematic analysis and all three authors engaged in the “devil’s advocate”-technique (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). In line with our social constructivist stance, we discussed several different perspectives, theoretical links and potential ways of representing the data. This dialogue encouraged reflexivity and helped guide the analytical process.

Third, member reflection was used to ensure participants felt appropriately represented and included in the analysis process (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Both participants were asked to partake in a member reflection meeting, although only Elis did; Petra declined due to a lack of time as she was on tour. However, the stability of her perfectionism across time meant that her 2020 interview became a form of member reflection in itself (i.e., she felt appropriately represented in the 2015 analysis). During the meeting with Elis, the authors presented an illustration of the preliminary findings (Figure 2), presented quotes for each part of the figure and explained our interpretations. When encouraged to comment or reflect on the findings, Elis repeatedly stated that he was comfortable with how he was being represented.

Fourth, thick description is used to describe our findings via extensive use of quotes; this is valuable since the case study format aims to promote an understanding of what goes beyond the individual cases, and the contexts in which the participants live are viewed as important (Geertz, 2008). In the findings section, quotes are from 2020 unless otherwise stated. Fifth and finally, data triangulation was enabled via the use of multiple data sources: a well-used quality strengthening method in qualitative studies and case studies (Yin, 2009). The data sources consisted of four interviews, four questionnaires (the MIPS; Stoeber et al., 2006) and Elis’ member reflection meeting.
Results and Discussion

The combined quantitative and qualitative findings indicated differences in how the five-year period between data collections was experienced by the two participants. In Figure 1, the first indication of such differences is illustrated via the questionnaire findings from 2015 and 2020. As shown, Elis’ PS changed from low/moderate (2.8) to moderate/high (4.0) and his PC score from moderate/high (4.0) to low/moderate (2.8). Petra was very stable in her perfectionism, reporting high PS (5.6 and 6.0) and low PC (2.0 and 2.2) at both times.

Results and Discussion: Elis

The interview findings suggested that Elis’ perfectionism developed from pure ECP to something more akin to mixed perfectionism. In Figure 2, we illustrate this development alongside several contextual and motivational factors: some of these appeared to have changed, in turn influencing Elis’ perfectionism, while others remained unchanged.

Changes in Elis’ Perfectionism

In 2015, Elis reported that “I usually do not really strive to be perfect... sometimes I really do... but quite often I do not strive to be perfect.”. Contrast this with what he said in 2020:

“I have a picture of what perfect is and I mostly want to achieve it. But at the same time, it’s not that I get really angry or... think it's very hard when I do not achieve it. ... I think on a scale from 1 to 10 maybe it's six and a half or something like that...”. In line with the questionnaire findings then, Elis’ PS seems to have developed from quite low to moderately high. Regarding his PC, Elis said in 2020 that:

“When I was younger, I really thought it was so hard to make mistakes because then I really thought... I was worse from just one mistake... But right now, I don’t feel that at all. ...now it is much easier for me to distinguish the mistake from me as a person”.
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This is in line with both the findings from the questionnaire and what Elis himself thought about the change of his PC: “... today I think it is less perfectionistic concern but it is definitely still there”.

**Change of Motivation - Mixed Motivation**

**Controlled Motivation 2015.** Elis’s perfectionism changed in parallel with his motivation to dance, because in the early years he mainly danced to please others. As such, his motivation could be seen as controlled (Ryan & Deci, 2000):

“I didn’t choose to do the entrance exam ... middle school was not my initiative either. ...not that I hated it, I still liked my friends but it was absolutely nothing I loved ...I did it mostly just to make mum happy. I did it for her most of the time.”

Elis’ controlled motivation during middle (approx. 10-12 yrs) and lower secondary school (approx. 13-16 yrs) was influenced by his parents often making decisions for him, influencing especially his autonomy. When trying to be supportive by increasing their engagement in Elis’ dancing, he felt more pressure to continue so as to not disappoint them despite not really enjoying it.

**Mixed Motivation 2020.** In the second interview, it was clear that Elis enjoyed dance much more: “The best thing about dance today is that I get so happy”. As an example of his more autonomous motivation, he said: “I notice much more myself what I do well and what I do not.” Still, Elis got some of his motivation from external rewards (e.g., positive reinforcement in the form of a teacher saying “good”) in 2020. For instance, on re-reading a quote from 2015 he reflected that “… This ‘I want to show that I shine’, that it shines in me when I get a ‘good’, I can definitely still feel that. ...such...confirmation from the teacher can really make me want to continue even more”.

**Factors Affecting Change**

As illustrated in the arrow in Figure 2, Elis appears to have been influenced by basic need support as well as by personal growth.
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**Basic need support.** Elis gave examples of changes over time which involved greater support for *autonomy, relatedness* and *competence*.

**Autonomy.** Elis seemed to have been greatly influenced by an increased sense of autonomy. For example, when his parents gave him more responsibility, controlled motivation decreased as he became more autonomous:

“... When I got more responsibility, it felt like I got a lot more control of my dance as well, no one said what I would do... when I got much more responsibility, I thought it [ballet] became much more fun...I did not do it for anyone but myself.”

This is further strengthened when saying:

“I decided I wanted a higher grade in dance because I wanted high grades in all subjects so... I really got to work and that made it [dance] more fun because then it felt like I had something to strive for... and then I really thought it was fun...so I absolutely think that’s a big reason I started upper secondary school. ... when I actually wanted to be good, it was like taking responsibility.”

When Elis made the autonomous decision during late secondary school to strive for higher grades, he appears to have internalized his motivation. A parallel can be drawn to a recent investigation indicating that autonomy support from dance teachers correlated positively with higher engagement in dance (Jowett et al., 2021). Notably, Elis’ motivation is not fully internalized (i.e., not just about interest, enjoyment or meaning).

**Relatedness.** It was important for Elis to feel that people cared about him and as his teachers became stricter in upper secondary school (approx. 17-19 yrs), the need for peer cohesion increased. He received most social support from friends, similar to how social aspects have been found to be very important for young athletes with pure ECP (Mallinson-Howard et al., 2018). Elis exemplifies this by saying: “… to perhaps have harsher teachers
resulted in, I had to find some... comfort with someone, and that became classmates... that is really what I think is absolutely one of the most important things now... the group.”

**Competence.** An improved sense of competence also seems to have been influential in Elis’ changed experiences of perfectionism: “... I think as I've gotten maybe a little better, I think, has affected [my perfectionism]. I feel more competent you know.” This stronger sense of ballet competence may have contributed to decreased concern about making mistakes. Along similar lines, perceived competence has been found to boost performers’ motivation and limit performance anxiety (Haraldsen et al., 2019).

**Personal Growth.** Elis perceived that personal growth had affected his perfectionism; this comprised increases in maturity, experience, and psychological skills.

**Maturity.** Since Elis was 12 years old in the first interview and 17 in the second, it is unsurprising that maturity seemed to be one of the strongest influences on his perfectionism:

“...it's probably also a maturity thing that it is easier to... see the situation better and understand that it does not matter so much if I make a mistake and I guess have learned to know myself much better... so it is definitely maturity.”

Of course, one does not have to be an elite dancer to experience extensive physiological and psychological changes during adolescence (Branje et al., 2007). Furthermore, adolescents’ identity formation is guided by progressive changes in how they deal with commitment (Klimstra et al., 2010). Because Elis’ dance commitment changed over the years, this may have made him less prone to PC over time.

**Experience.** Tightly linked to maturity is Elis’ increased dance experience, helping him cope with mistakes: “...probably because I'm so used to [mistakes] now.... much more than I was back then. I think it's something you learn when you get older”. Put differently, it seemed that Elis learnt through sheer exposure that making mistakes was not so terrible after all. For example, he said; “... I have been through so many mistakes. ... And then I learned from my mistakes....”. With experience, Elis saw that everyone makes mistakes, making him
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less concerned about making them. This resembles the exposure used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as part of perfectionism treatment (Gustafsson & Lundqvist, 2016).

**Psychological Skills.** Over the years, Elis has had to deal with several challenging situations from which he seems to have developed various psychological skills. One of the most pronounced was self-compassion:

“...when I started upper secondary school, it became so much harder...and the teachers were really meaner, so... it was like I needed to find more kind of inner... that at least I liked myself, even though my teachers might not. ...I really think I learned a lot from that. ...I understood that if the teachers still would come and shout that I made a mistake, then I do not have to shout at myself too.”

Elis’ use of self-compassion resembles literature presenting it as an effective method to decrease self-criticism and concerns about mistakes (e.g., Mosewich et al., 2013).

**Unchanging Factors**

Despite Elis’ many changes, some factors remained relatively unchanged between 2015 and 2020. These are illustrated in the bottom box of Figure 2 and include *basic need frustration* and Elis’ *sensitive personality*.

**Basic Need Frustration.** Elis still experienced difficulties with basic need frustration in 2020. This was exemplified in his description of ballet’s strong hierarchies which made him feel inferior and unable to speak up:

“*It is very much the world of ballet I would say ... the teachers are always right and... you would never be able to disagree with them. ... you could never show that you do not agree.... because the teacher is so much higher up than the students.*”

Besides being an example of autonomy need frustration, this quote reflects the persistent yet problematic teacher-student relationships typical of ballet sub-culture (Haraldsen et al., 2020; Pickard, 2015). Elis explained his basic need frustration further:
“... If a teacher says ‘well, when you are in a ballet company...’ and ‘when you do this’; it can be difficult because it feels like the teacher decides for you... and I have never liked that. ... ‘I hate this 'when'... because I never know what can happen... It feels like there is an expectation that we have to be something.’”

It seems that hearing authorities talk about “when...” makes Elis feel pressured to fit into certain ideals despite not necessarily identifying with them, potentially frustrating both autonomy and relatedness. It is conceivable that it could also fuel PS.

**Sensitive Personality.** A more latent theme, present in both interviews, was Elis’ sensitive and empathetic personality. He strived for others to like him and strongly avoided the opposite: “I can follow anything a teacher says just because I don’t want them to dislike me.” This sensitivity was also indicated via the emphasis he put on others’ opinions: “It's like the teacher is the ballet, and then if the teacher says that you have done something good, then I'm good at dancing.”

When presented with this interpretation in the member reflection meeting Elis agreed, saying it was natural for him to try to detect what authorities want from him and adjust his behavior accordingly. Similar findings are reported in a case study of a perfectionistic dancer who also described doing as she was told (Nordin-Bates & Abrahamsen, 2016). More positively, Elis’ sensitive personality also made him kind and thoughtful. Describing pas de deux work (i.e., working in pairs), he explained:

“... I cannot get stressed if it’s not perfect because that is a bit mean towards the other [dancer]... Should I get annoyed about... something my partner did feels very mean...... then I would somehow want to calm [her]... it is not so... important that it becomes perfect.”

To understand this better, future studies should examine whether pure ECP performers are more likely to display sensitive and empathic behaviors, including adjusting their behavior to fit others’ expectations and demands.
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Results and Discussion: Petra

Petra’s interview findings, illustrated in Figure 3, corresponded well with her questionnaires. Overall, they support the idea that she maintained high PS without experiencing high PC, thus representing stable pure PSP.

Stable Perfectionism: High PS, Low PC

The central box of figure 3 illustrates Petra’s stable pure PSP, created on the basis of quotes such as “... it's totally kind of the same” and “I was always working hard. I remember even summer schools I could stay even after class even if it was late. ...it's something I've always had...”. Indicating her stable low PC, Petra reported that “... I'm not worried if I make mistakes or things like that. Yeah, I mean it's kind of the same [since 2015] actually.” She developed her reflections on PC more when saying:

“I have really high goals. There is no doubt. But if I would be concerned or... be sad about something ... maybe [I would] not strive as high... Maybe [someone with high PC] will not have as high goals. ...that's why I try to always think positive [and] not be worried.”

Autonomous Motivation

Petra’s stable perfectionism appeared to exist alongside strong autonomous motivation. Specifically, her perfectionism is couched within and expressed through an intrinsic love for dance, exemplified when saying “I do it because I love it” and “I’m rehearsing mostly for myself... Not for others”. Her strong sense of autonomy is further illustrated when saying: “…these thoughts and feelings... comes from me. It's not that somebody told me I have to think [or] do this way. ...It's how I was shaped by myself.”

Petras’ autonomous motivation was exemplified when talking about her love for dance and finding meaning in being an inspiration: “I can probably say that [one of the best things] with dance is that you can inspire people”. Her autonomous motivation can be compared to literature indicating that dancers representing pure PSP report higher levels of
intrinsic motivation compared to those representing other perfectionism types (Nordin-Bates et al., 2017; Quested et al., 2014).

Uses Supportive Contextual Factors to Assist Motivation

As illustrated by the arrow going into the autonomous motivation box in Figure 3, Petra seemed to use contextual influences to support her motivation. For instance, she reported thriving when ballet masters were energetic, loud and humorous. She also interpreted her parents’ high expectations for her as supportive: “if they [my parents] have high expectations is it just... for supporting me... of course every parent I guess have high expectations of their children but... they were always supportive...” This highlights a difference in how Petra and Elis interpreted social expectations and contextual impacts, given that Elis, too, was adamant that his parents were trying to be supportive yet he still found this problematic.

Resilient Personality

As illustrated in the outer center box of Figure 3, Petra’s pure PSP and autonomous motivation are couched within a seemingly very resilient personality. In fact, Petra saw herself as different to others: “I just feel that I have a very kind of different personality”.

During both interviews Petra gave examples of her resilience:

“... probably it is my personality. Because I’m quite a... positive person and... have [a] positive mind. I can also be a very strong person. I have a very strong personality. I never stop... [I] always have to find something positive to think about to reach the goal.”

Able to Repel Controlling Contextual Impacts

The bold line surrounding the resilient personality box in Figure 3 represents Petra’s ability to repel controlling contextual impacts and not get affected by stressful situations. For example, she said:
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“If somebody pushed me like ‘come on you have to do it’ ... I don't think it’s negative... for me it would be positive... they say it because they want me to be better. They want me to be good and if they...scream at me or say something...like ‘why you do this way?’ they want me to be good and I understand and I respect that because everybody has a different way of telling you.”

Reflecting on mistakes, Petra said: “Then I kind of talk with myself: ‘it’s okay, it’s gonna be good. It's a mistake, yes you did it, but think not to do it again’; that's how I think.”

Thus, she used positive self-talk to repel negative thoughts of imperfection. Although self-talk is as one of the key psychological skills in applied sport psychology (Andersen, 2009), its role in perfectionism management is perhaps underexplored. Further research into this potentially valuable skill is warranted.

We interpreted Petra’s resilient personality as protection against controlling external influences, enabling her to re-interpret and extract constructive parts from otherwise harsh criticism. Despite being able to endure challenging situations she was not immune to negativity, however, and if the controlling impacts became too great, she would instead cope by distancing herself from the controlling environment:

“I could always push it away but it would be really hard... I'm this person, I'm always gonna push it away... Of course, [if] it is only negativity then... in the end ...I will be tired of it ... but then it's not my place [to be]...”

Overall, we interpreted Petra’s resilient personality as protection against external influences and as a boost for her autonomous motivation (Mahoney et al., 2014).

Interestingly, the ability to respond positively to negative events has been seen as an indicator of both talent and resilience (Baker et al., 2019; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), terms that certainly seem to characterize Petra.
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**Contributing Factors to Successful Outcomes**

As Petra has been employed by well-recognized companies since graduation, we consider her dance career as successful. Importantly, Petra is proud of her achievements: “... I reached the company of my dreams when I was younger ... I’m very...proud of myself for reaching my goal because it wasn't easy you know.” The arrow in Figure 3 illustrates three personal qualities which appeared to contribute to her success: *high goals, high standards* and *hard yet flexible work.*

**High Goals.** In line with her high levels of PS, Petra set high goals and explained how meaningful those were: “I have to have goals to... have a purpose. Because otherwise, why am I doing this? ...I need to always try... harder to make it. If I stop, I will never be what I want to be.” She exemplified her goals as follows:

“I have had that [a dream/goal for my dancing] since I was little. It is to reach as high as possible in our profession, which is principal dancer. ... that's what I strive for first and foremost. And the second [goal] is to dance and look as good as possible in ballet. And that is technical, emotional and...the lines.”

**High Standards.** As well as setting goals, Petra acknowledged the need to act and behave in certain ways to reach them: “If you want to strive high, you have to be as good as possible... not only...in the technique, it is also... emotional. You always have to express what you are doing, it is very, very important.”

We labeled the combination of Petra’s values and behaviors as *standards* which she strives to live by in order to reach her goals. These standards are separated from goals: “It's not that this is a goal, this is everyday thing actually...we always try to be as good as possible...even if I wouldn’t have such a big goal, I would still try my best always”. These high standards are explained further when saying:

“I would say... eating very good for your body... waking up early, going early to warm up, to do some exercise, to try do classes as good as possible, rehearse as...
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good as possible. This is kind of usual thing for us if you want to achieve something. This is what you have to be and this is kind of perfectionistic…”

These standards are like beacons toward which Petra adjusts behaviors to reach her goals. Acting in accordance with valued behaviors instead of reacting to emotions represents strong self-regulation and is positively correlated with successful athletic outcomes (Balk & Englert, 2020).

**Hard yet Flexible Work.** Since Petra’s goals are important to her and because she acknowledges the standards needed to reach them, her striving for perfection is characterized by hard work: “I …would work all day because I’m like that. I’m… working very hard… I could do so many exercises but in the end my body always get like… it hurts, you know….in the end your body say no, please.” This mirrors evidence that people with high PS push themselves very hard and may become rigid or obsessive in their pursuits (Hill et al., 2015); a description that was also used for Petra after her first interview (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021). In her second interview, however, Petra emphasized the importance of training smart. For instance, when realizing she is close to overtraining, she stops, reflects, and adjusts: “…I work so much I and try so many times…then I realize ‘wait I have to stop and … work with my head’... First of all, ‘why am I doing this, for what am I doing this?’…”. Thus, while Petra strives for perfection, she has a broader perspective which allows flexibility and rest; essentially, she self-regulates so as not to compromise long-term goal achievement.

Petra’s PS was previously described as rigid on the basis of her frequent use of terms such as “ought” and “must”, her desire for things to be “just right,” and what appeared to be a need for constant, almost obsessive, hard work (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021). When asked to reflect on this assumed rigidity in 2020, aided by excerpts from her 2015 interview, Petra felt somewhat misunderstood. Explaining her reasoning, she reaffirmed the autonomous underpinnings of her seemingly rigid behavior as follows:
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“I think what I mean is like... it's a must for myself, but I do it because I love it still. Because if I don't say to myself ‘I must’ then maybe I will relax or... You know. ...I know what you mean, of course, it's not that. I do it because I must, it's because I love what I do.”

While we may still wonder about Petra’s reluctance to relax, the possibility to revisit interpretations and conclusions in collaboration with participants is an example of how repeat interviews, or member reflections, can be very useful indeed.

General Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of two high-level dancers representing opposite sides of the 2x2-model of perfectionism (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010). Specifically, we re-interviewed in 2020 two dancers who in 2015 had been considered to represent pure PSP and pure ECP. In so doing, we considered how their perfectionism might have changed over those five years in relation to contextual and motivational influences. The findings indicated that the pure ECP dancer, Elis, seemed to have increased his perfectionistic strivings (PS) and decreased his perfectionistic concerns (PC), such that he was more representative of mixed perfectionism in 2020. Although it is not possible to state with certainty what caused Elis’ move toward healthier forms of perfectionism and motivation, he gave clear examples of personal growth and basic psychological needs support (e.g., increased parental autonomy support). It is possible that these improvements were also what kept him in dance, and ultimately gain a professional contract, rather than drop out. Petra, representing pure PSP, presented stability across the five-year period. Despite the normal strong and positive correlations between PS and PC (Hill et al., 2020), she seemed resilient to the development of PC and she continued to enjoy performance successes. Her stable and grounded personality were interpreted as a helpful contributing factor, together with her intrinsic love for dance.
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Our findings can be understood in light of the 2x2 model of perfectionism (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010), with our pure PSP dancer reporting consistent autonomous motivation over time, and our pure ECP dancer reporting less controlled and more autonomous motivation as he moved from pure ECP toward mixed perfectionism. As such, they have provided valuable qualitative examples to the largely quantitative literature which has obtained similar findings in sport (see Hill et al., 2020, for a review) and in dance specifically (e.g., Nordin-Bates et al., 2017; Quested et al., 2014). Additionally using self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) further helped to frame our findings, thereby adding to the literature which has used SDT to deepen our understanding of perfectionism in sport and dance (e.g., Haraldsen et al., 2019; Haraldsen et al., 2020; Jowett et al., 2021; Mallinson & Hill, 2011; Nordin-Bates, 2020). Notably, our study design does not allow certainty regarding causality, and many other factors can have influenced the dancers’ perfectionism and motivation across the time period studied.

Autonomy emerged as a prominent theme in this study, although in different ways for the two participants. For Elis, enhanced autonomy appeared to be an influential factor in his development, whereby an increase in responsibility and sense of agency seemed to help him internalize his strivings for dance. For Petra, a notable finding was her strong independence, how she saw herself as fully in charge of her own actions and how dance was deeply meaningful to her (i.e., strong autonomy). For such strongly independent, perhaps individualistic, persons with autonomous motivation, the importance of need support may not be fully recognized. That is, they may assume that their need satisfaction is mostly, or even entirely, due to their own talents or capacities and not appreciate the conditions that have enabled them to feel that way. It is also possible that such individuals truly do require less need support than more vulnerable individuals because they are better at supporting their own needs. How performers can work to satisfy their own needs is an important avenue for future research.
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Overall, we support suggestions made by other authors that autonomy support may
be crucial in aiding the internationalization of motivation, supporting perfectionistic dancers,
and other favorable outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2013; Haraldsen et al., 2019, Haraldsen et al.,
2020; Jowett et al., 2021; Nordin-Bates, 2020). However, such suggestions are typically made
only for leaders such as coaches and teachers; we additionally recommend parents to support
their children’s autonomy for dance or sport. This may include being open about why one
recommends a particular activity for them, letting them choose between several realistic
options, and being non-judgmental if they want to stop. Future studies might also usefully
investigate whether, and how, systematically implemented autonomy support could help
performers manage their perfectionism. In so doing, it would be valuable to consider age to a
greater extent than was possible here; indeed, it is not surprising that Elis changed more
between ages 12-17 than Petra did between ages 18-23 given that personality development is
more pronounced in adolescence (Branje et al., 2007).

Strengths and Limitations

Given the nature of our study design, conclusions should be drawn with caution.
Firstly, the numerical findings used to identify potential interviewees are limited, relative and
subject to interpretation. In particular, Elis’ initial scores are not all that close to the end
points of the scale; as such, his “pure” ECP could be considered moderate rather than
extreme. Still, his first interview did suggest that his strivings were mostly low/vague, and his
concerns at least somewhat high; hence, we denoted him a representative of pure ECP here
just like in our earlier publication (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021). It may be unrealistic to try
to recruit participants yielding the minimum score for one aspect of perfectionism (e.g., a
score of 1 for PS or PC on the MIPS; Stoeber et al., 2006) and the maximum score for the
other (e.g., score of 6 on the MIPS). Indeed, representatives of pure perfectionism are defined
with a degree of subjectivity (i.e., where the cut-off score is placed) and, even then, such
cases are difficult to find (Mallinson-Howard et al., 2018; Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021; Sellars et al., 2016).

Presenting data from just two time points has limitations; for instance, questionnaire data may be subject to situational influences on the day of completion. Still, we noted with interest that the qualitative and quantitative components were largely aligned; this may be seen as a form of indirect validity evidence for the MIPS (Stoeber et al., 2006). Our second set of interviews had a retrospective aspect to allow discussion of perfectionism development, but a larger number of interviews (e.g., annually) would have made for a stronger design. Longitudinal studies with a large number of representatives for pure perfectionism would be required to generalize the findings of the present study, though it may be that in-depth case studies such as the present one are more feasible.

The use of strategic selection can be considered a strength of the present study, allowing triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data (Noor, 2008; Yin, 2009). Two other strategies, devil’s advocate technique and member reflection, further strengthened the rigor of the qualitative part of our study (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The exploratory nature of our design provided freedom to explore different viewpoints to understand the participants’ experiences of perfectionism (Yin, 2009). In line with this exploratory approach and our social constructionist position (Smith & McGannon, 2018), we remain cognizant that the way in which data are interpreted and presented here represent just one possible way of doing so, and that all of us authors are knowledgeable in SDT. However, there were no questions about SDT-related constructs, such as motivation or basic needs, in the interview guides. As part of our “devil’s advocate”-discussions, we discussed the possible utility of multiple theoretical frameworks before deciding on the present one due to the parsimonious and comprehensive way in which it allowed us to conceptualize the findings.
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Conclusion

This study examined experiences of perfectionism in ballet, with both stability and change being evidenced. The findings add to a growing body of literature about the nature and implications of perfectionism in high-performance settings (e.g., Hill et al., 2015; Nordin-Bates, 2020; Nordin-Bates & Abrahamsen, 2016; Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021; Sellars et al., 2016; Speirs Neumeister, 2004). However, it is unique in providing a qualitative perspective on perfectionism development over time. When trying to understand why one dancer exhibited a stable yet flexible and adaptive form of perfectionism (pure PSP) while the other experienced a change in perfectionism from pure ECP toward mixed perfectionism, personality, contextual and motivational aspects all seemed to be important. In particular, both participants spoke very positively about autonomy, including the need for independence and being oneself. In combination with previous literature, this suggests that autonomy support could be an evidence-based and accessible way to help perfectionistic performers develop and thrive.

References

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Figure 1

Self-reported Perfectionism Scores in 2015 and 2020 (MIPS)
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Figure 2

Illustration of Elis' Change in Perfectionism

Controlled Motivation

- Basic need support
- Personal growth – increased:
  - Experience
  - Maturity
  - Psychological skills

Mixed Motivation

- Moderate /high PS
- Moderate /low PC

Unchanging factors:
Basic need frustration – Sensitive personality
Figure 3

Illustration of Petras' Stable Perfectionism

- High goals
- High standards
- Hard yet flexible work

Able to repel controlling contextual impacts
Uses supportive contextual factors to assist motivation
Resilient Personality
Autonomous Motivation
Stable Pure PSP
Positive Outcomes