



Preoccupied attachment, need to belong, shame, and interpersonal perfectionism: An investigation of the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model



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ABSTRACT

According to the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model, interpersonal components of perfectionism (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation) develop when individuals exhibit an inordinate need for belongingness and shame as a result of early attachment insecurity and/or a lack of emotional attunement in the caregiver–child relationship. This study hence examined the mediating effects of the need to belong and shame on the relationships between insecure attachment and interpersonal perfectionism. A sample of 513 undergraduates completed self-report measures including trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, shame, the need for belongingness, and attachment styles. As hypothesized, socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation were both positively associated with the need to belong, shame, and insecure attachment styles. Furthermore, results from multiple mediation analyses indicated that the associations between preoccupied attachment and interpersonal components of perfectionism were mediated by a strong need for belongingness and shame. The present study hence provides further empirical support for the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model and highlights the importance of examining the quality of attachment relationships for individuals with elevated interpersonal perfectionism.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Trait perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation

Perfectionism, as it has been established in its literature of the past two decades, is a multidimensional construct that incorporates both self-related and interpersonally-related components (e.g., Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Hewitt et al., 2003). In addition to perfectionistic traits that drive various kinds of perfectionistic behavior (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), perfectionistic self-presentation styles involve the interpersonal expression of perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2003), and automatic perfectionistic cognitions reflect the intrapersonal expression of perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). Perfectionistic traits (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) consist of

self-oriented perfectionism (demanding perfection of oneself), *other-oriented perfectionism* (demanding perfection of others), and *socially prescribed perfectionism* (perceiving others as demanding perfection of oneself). Whereas trait perfectionism encompasses the need to achieve perfection, perfectionistic self-presentation involves the drive to *appear perfect* by promoting a public image of perfection, concealing or not disclosing perceived flaws and imperfections. This form of impression management consists of three distinct facets (Hewitt et al., 2003): *perfectionistic self-promotion* (public promotion of one's supposedly perfect image), *nondisplay of imperfection* (avoidance of behavioral displays of one's perceived imperfection), and *nondisclosure of imperfection* (avoidance of verbal disclosures of imperfection).

Previous research has linked interpersonal components of perfectionism such as socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation with negative psychological outcomes including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, personality disorders, and suicide behavior (for a review, see Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2011). Furthermore, the importance of perfectionism in the interpersonal realm has been demonstrated by its associations

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with problems involving control, intimacy, negative rumination, emotional expressiveness, and assertiveness (e.g., Hewitt, Habke, Lee-Baggeley, Sherry, & Flett, 2008; Mackinnon & Sherry, 2012). Despite a large body of evidence supporting the link between interpersonal perfectionism and psychological problems, the developmental process of interpersonal perfectionism has received relatively little empirical attention.

1.2. Attachment style, need to belong, and shame as possible antecedents to interpersonal perfectionism

Since early childhood, people develop internal ‘working models’ of the self and others based on early relationship experiences, from which they acquire affect-regulatory capacity and skills to create and establish positive, meaningful relationships throughout life (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The rupture or non-attunement in early attachment relationships has long-term negative consequences on one’s personality development and socio-emotional functioning (Bowlby, 1980). Unlike securely attached individuals, individuals with insecure attachment have chronically unmet needs for acceptance and belongingness, as well as strong negative affective reactions to actual or imagined social exclusion or ostracism (for reviews, see Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Based on Bowlby’s (1980) attachment theory, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed four adult attachment styles based on four quadrants of positive versus negative models of self and others, including secure (positive self and positive others), preoccupied (negative self and positive others), fearful (negative self and negative others), and dismissing (positive self and negative others) styles. Whereas individuals with a positive other model (i.e., secure, preoccupied attachment) are motivated by a strong need for belongingness and therefore tend to approach others for intimacy and support, those with a negative other model (i.e., fearful, dismissing attachment) are less driven by a desire for belongingness and hence are more inclined to avoid emotional intimacy (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). *Preoccupied* individuals may have a particularly strong need to belong, to fit in, or to feel accepted (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney & Noller, 1990). Ironically, *preoccupied* individuals’ hypervigilance to rejection and their maladaptive efforts to avoid conflicts or abandonment can create significant challenges forming and maintaining mutually supportive close relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Bowlby (1980) further suggested that early attachment relationships give rise to powerful, enduring emotions, such as shame. Shame is generally considered a negative, intense affective reaction following perceived rejections and losses and is often associated with global negative self-attributions (e.g., “I am an unlovable person for having done...,” Lewis, 1971). Lewis (1971) suggested that the treatment of oneself by loved ones such as parental figures can become internalized standards that are used to evaluate the self. Shame, therefore, at least in part, is caused by perceived failures to meet others’ expectations. *Preoccupied* individuals who have an inordinate need for belongingness are particularly susceptible to shame, partly due to the tendency to blame oneself for perceived failures and rejections (Cross & Hansen, 2000; Wei, Shaffer, Young, & Zakalik, 2005). In order to minimize the risk for rejection, people often modify their thoughts and attitudes, or learn to act or present themselves in ways in which they can obtain approval and acceptance (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It has been theorized that individuals with an anxious or preoccupied attachment orientation may attempt to be or appear “perfect” or hide imperfections as a way of mitigating the sense of shame and enhancing a sense of

connectedness with others (Hewitt, Flett, & Mikail, 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

1.3. Perfectionism self disconnection model

Building on earlier theoretical and empirical work on early attachment and personality development (e.g., Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005; Bowlby, 1980; Horney, 1950; Mikulincer, 1995), Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, and Caelian (2006) developed and expanded (Hewitt et al., 2014) a model of perfectionism and psychopathology called the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model (PSDM). The PSDM postulates that perfectionism, particularly socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation, may originate from difficult or traumatic relational experiences with primary attachment figures (Hewitt et al., 2014). These early experiences may give rise to insecure attachment with others, and an overwhelming sense of shame, as well as powerful but unfulfilled needs for acceptance and approval (Banai et al., 2005; Hewitt et al., 2014; Horney, 1950). As described earlier, preoccupied individuals may be especially motivated to meet perfectionistic demands set by others or to present a perfect or flawless façade. Perfectionism, especially perfectionistic self-presentation, is therefore seen as a means to secure acceptance and caring from others and to avoid rejection, shame, and humiliation. Paradoxically, for these individuals, the very same behaviors that were engaged to enhance one’s connection can often create further rejections and alienation (Hewitt et al., 2006, 2014).

1.4. Existing empirical research

Recent studies have found preliminary evidence supporting the PSDM. Chen and colleagues (2012) found that the significant association between fearful attachment and social disconnection was partially mediated by nondisclosure of imperfections in adolescents. Furthermore, Boone (2013) demonstrated that anxious attachment as assessed by the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) was positively associated with socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and binge eating behavior among adolescents, and perfectionistic self-promotion fully mediated the association between avoidant attachment and binge eating. Together, these findings indicate a strong relationship between attachment styles and perfectionistic self-presentation, at least among adolescents, and that perfectionism may result in the opposite of what it is intended to – alienation, distress, and a thwarted sense of belonging.

1.5. Goals and hypotheses

Despite preliminary evidence supporting the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model, the extant research does not address the mechanism by which insecure attachment may be associated with interpersonal components of perfectionism. For example, thwarted belongingness and a sense of shame that are central to the PSDM have received little empirical attention. Furthermore, previous studies (e.g., Boone, 2013; Chen et al., 2012) focused only on adolescents. Therefore, an important goal of the present study was to investigate the relationship between insecure attachment and perfectionism through their associations with the need to belong and shame in young adults.

In summary, we hypothesized that, first, socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation would be positively associated with insecure attachment styles, the need to belong, and a sense of shame. Secondly, in keeping with the PSDM

(Hewitt et al., 2006, 2014), preoccupied attachment was hypothesized to enhance the need for belongingness and feelings of shame, which in turn would elevate levels of socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 513 undergraduate students (148 males, 365 females) recruited from University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Participants' age ranged between 17 and 50 years of age ($M = 20.61$, $SD = 3.14$). Upon completion all participants were debriefed and received extra course credits for their participation. The study received ethical approval from the university research ethics board.

2.2. Measures

Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) assesses perfectionistic traits using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This 45-item measure contains three subscales: *self-oriented perfectionism* (e.g., "When I am working on something, I cannot relax until it is perfect"), *other-oriented perfectionism* (e.g., "I have high expectations for the people who are important to me"), and *socially prescribed perfectionism* (e.g., "The people around me expect me to succeed at everything I do"). Research on the MPS in clinical and nonclinical samples has generally shown high levels of reliability and validity (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The Cronbach's alpha for the MPS ranged between .85 and .89 in the current study.

Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale (PSPS; Hewitt et al., 2003) assesses interpersonal expression of perfectionism using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This 27-item measure contains three subscales: *perfectionistic self-promotion* (e.g., "I must always appear to be perfect"), *nondisplay of imperfection* (e.g., "I do not want people to see me do something unless I am very good at it"), and *nondisclosure of imperfection* (e.g., "admitting failure to others is the worst possible thing").

The multidimensionality, reliability, and validity of the PSPS have been supported by several studies using adult samples (e.g., Hewitt et al., 2003). The Cronbach's alpha for the PSPS subscales ranged between .67 and .81.

Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) measures four continuous adult attachment styles on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). This 30-item measure assesses the following: *secure* (e.g., "I find it easy to get emotionally close to others"), *preoccupied* (e.g., "I worry that others do not value me as much as I value them"), *dismissing* (e.g., "I prefer not to have other people depend on me"), and *fearful* attachment (e.g., "I find it difficult to trust others completely"). Empirical evidence has shown that the RSQ has strong test-retest reliability and discriminant validity (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). The Cronbach's alpha for the RSQ subscales ranged between .53 and .66 in the current study.

Need to Belong Scale (NBS; Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2012) is a 10-item measure of belongingness motivation that is rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include "I want other people to accept me". The NBS demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$).

State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS; Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994) is a 15-item measure of state feelings of shame, guilt, and pride. These items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not feeling this way at all*) to 5 (*feeling this way very strongly*). Only shame items are used in the current study (e.g., "I want to sink into the floor and disappear," "I feel small"). The Cronbach's alpha for the shame subscale was .87. State shame has moderate to strong correlations with measures assessing dispositional or proneness to shame such as Test of Self-Conscious Affect (Tangney, Dearing, Wagner, & Gramzow, 2000).

2.3. Data analytic plan

To investigate our second hypothesis that the need to belong and shame mediate the relationship between preoccupied attachment and interpersonal perfectionism, a two-step serial mediational analysis was conducted, as shown in Fig. 1. To test for

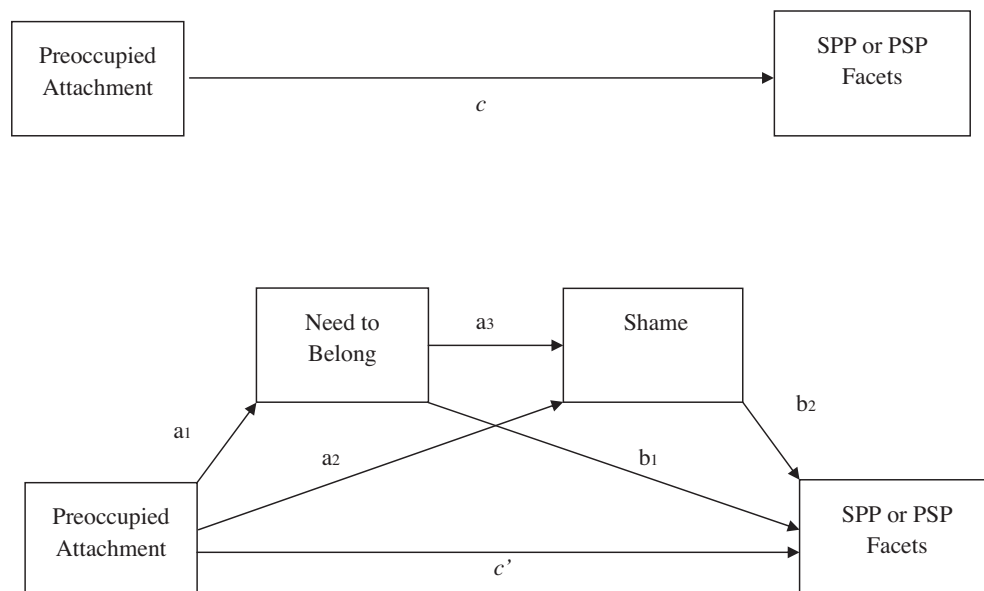


Fig. 1. Illustration of a serial multiple-step indirect effect, preoccupied attachment (predictor variable) is hypothesized to exert an indirect effect on socially prescribed perfectionism or perfectionistic self-presentation style (outcome variable) through the need to belong (Mediator 1), shame (Mediator 2), and/or the need to belong and shame (PROCESS Multiple Mediation Model 6; Hayes, 2012).

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, alpha coefficients, and correlations of trait perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation facets, attachment styles, the need to belong, and shame ($n = 513$).

	SOP	SPP	OOP	Self-promotion	Nondisplay	Non-disclosure	Secure	Preoccupied	Dismissing	Fearful	Need to belong	Shame
Trait perfectionism												
SOP	–											
SPP	.44**	–										
OOP	.45**	.35**	–									
Perfectionistic self-presentation												
Self-promotion	.57**	.56**	.36**	–								
Nondisplay	.30**	.49**	.20**	.68**	–							
Nondisclosure	.29**	.50**	.22**	.63**	.61**	–						
Attachment styles												
Secure	-.02	-.18**	-.01	-.18**	-.22**	-.33**	–					
Preoccupied	.11**	.23**	.14**	.21**	.27**	.04	.04	–				
Dismissing	.18**	.16**	.06	.20**	.10*	.34**	-.30**	-.30**	–			
Fearful	.20**	.35**	.10*	.33**	.33**	.51**	-.48**	.10*	.44**	–		
Need to belong	.16**	.22**	.08	.30**	.44**	.04	-.07	.48**	-.23**	.02	–	
Shame	.03	.38**	-.04	.28**	.38**	.36**	-.23**	.22**	.04	.38**	.22**	–
<i>M</i>	70.50	53.77	58.31	42.74	46.68	23.54	3.21	2.99	3.23	2.92	35.77	8.59
<i>SD</i>	14.15	11.79	10.65	11.02	10.06	7.11	.66	.72	.64	.87	6.03	4.07
α	.89	.88	.85	.75	.81	.67	.53	.58	.66	.79	.83	.87

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 2
Multiple-step mediation analyses on preoccupied attachment, need to belong, shame, and socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation styles while controlling for gender ($n = 513$).

	Model 1: X: Preoccupied attachment M1: Need to belong M2: Shame Y: Socially prescribed perf.			Model 2: X: Preoccupied attachment M1: Need to belong M2: Shame Y: Perfectionistic self-promotion			Model 3: X: Preoccupied attachment M1: Need to belong M2: Shame Y: Nondisplay of imperf.			Model 4: X: Preoccupied attachment M1: Need to belong M2: Shame Y: Nondisclosure of imperf.		
Path estimates												
	Coeff.		SE	Coeff.		SE	Coeff.		SE	Coeff.		SE
a1	3.9753**		.3276	3.9644**		.3277	3.9644**		.3277	3.9644**		.3277
a2	0.8613**		.2757	0.8602**		.2756	0.8602**		.2756	0.8602**		.2756
a3	0.0989**		.0329	0.0971**		.0329	0.0971**		.0329	0.0971**		.0329
b1	0.1971*		.0909	0.4250**		.0868	0.6180**		.0724	−0.0268		.0565
b2	0.9424**		.1217	0.5626**		.1162	0.7186**		.0969	0.6479**		.0756
c	3.8407**		.7084	3.0778**		.6669	3.6760**		.6003	0.4278		.4415
c'	1.8749*		.7626	0.6925		.7276	0.3314		.6067	−0.2729		.4735
Indirect effects												
	Effect	Symmetric	CI	Effect	Symmetric	CI	Effect	Symmetric	CI	Effect	Symmetric	CI
Total	1.9658*	1.0685	2.9838	2.3852*	1.5955	3.3051	3.3446*	2.5177	4.2451	7007*	.1041	1.3098
M1	.7836*	.0244	1.6288	1.6847*	1.0078	2.4953	2.4498*	1.7271	3.2655	−.1061	−.6044	.3561
M2	.8117*	.2474	1.5090	.4839*	.1492	.9921	.6181*	.1864	1.1637	.5573*	.1754	1.0221
M1 & M2	.3705*	.1362	.6775	.2166*	.0731	.4540	.2767*	.1003	.5092	.2494*	.0845	.4635

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

the multiple-step mediating effects of need to belong and shame, we utilized the PROCESS Multiple Mediation Model 6 (Hayes, 2012). PROCESS is a conditional process modelling program that utilizes an ordinary least squares- or logistic-based path analytical framework to test for both indirect and direct effects (Hayes, 2012). Figure 1 depicts the two-mediator model in which the predictor variable (*X*) is modeled as affecting outcome variable (*Y*) through four pathways. One pathway is indirect and runs from *X* to *Y* through the first mediator (*M*1) only; a second indirect path runs through the second mediator (*M*2) only; and a third indirect pathway passes through both *M*1 and *M*2 sequentially, with *M*1 affecting *M*2. All indirect effects were subjected to bootstrap analyses with 10,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval (CI; see Table 2). A bias-corrected bootstrap 95% CI for the product of these paths that does not include zero provides evidence of a significant indirect effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha for all study measures are displayed in Table 1, which are consistent with previous studies using undergraduate samples (e.g., Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Leary et al., 2012; Marschall et al., 1994). Independent *t*-test analyses revealed that female participants scored significantly higher on the need for belongingness than their male counterparts, $t = 2.62$, $p < .01$, and hence gender was entered as a covariate in the subsequent mediation analyses.

3.2. Correlational analyses

Consistent with our first hypothesis, lower secure attachment and higher levels of insecure attachment styles (i.e., preoccupied,

dismissing, and fearful) were significantly correlated with socially prescribed perfectionism and all three perfectionistic self-presentation facets, with one exception that preoccupied attachment was not significantly correlated with nondisclosure of imperfection (see Table 1). Notably, both self-oriented perfectionism and other-oriented perfectionism were positively associated with preoccupied and fearful attachment, and self-oriented perfectionism was also significantly associated with dismissing attachment. As expected, the need to belong was positively associated with preoccupied attachment, self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation facets except for nondisclosure of imperfection, and was negatively correlated with dismissing attachment. And finally, as hypothesized, shame was significantly correlated with socially prescribed perfectionism, and perfectionistic self-presentation facets, and the need to belong, as well as preoccupied and fearful attachment.

3.3. Serial multiple mediational analyses

As described earlier, in order to test our second hypothesis, that both the need for belongingness and shame mediated the positive associations between preoccupied attachment and interpersonal components of perfectionism, we conducted a series of multiple mediational analyses. As shown in Table 2 (see Model 1), our results supported the hypothesized model: preoccupied attachment exerted an effect on the need to belong ($t = 12.13$, $b = 3.98$, $p < .001$), the need to belong then impacted shame ($t = 3.01$, $b = .99$, $p < .01$), which in turn, influenced levels of socially prescribed perfectionism ($t = 7.74$, $b = .94$, $p < .001$). Results indicate that significant indirect effects occurred for preoccupied attachment on the need to belong, with a point estimate of .78 and a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap (BCB) confidence interval (CI) of .02–1.63. Further, the need to belong had a significant indirect effect on shame, with a point estimate of .37 and a 95% BCB CI of .14–.68. And finally, shame had a significant indirect effect on socially prescribed perfectionism, with a point estimate of .81 and 95% BCB CI of .25–1.51. Preoccupied attachment has a significant direct effect on socially prescribed perfectionism independent of its effect on the need to belong and shame ($c' = 1.87$, $p < .05$). Similarly, we found that the need to belong and shame both had significant indirect effects on the relationships between preoccupied attachment and perfectionistic self-promotion and nondisplay of imperfection, separately (see Table 2). No significantly mediated model was found with nondisclosure of imperfection as the outcome variable (see Model 4 in Table 2).

4. Discussion

The present study replicates and extends previous research (Boone, 2013; Chen et al., 2012) by demonstrating significant associations between the interpersonal components of perfectionism (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation), insecure attachment styles, the need for belongingness, and shame. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first to have demonstrated a significantly mediated effect of the need to belong and shame in the associations between preoccupied attachment and interpersonal perfectionism. Our findings thus provide further support for the Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model (Hewitt et al., 2006, 2014).

4.1. Implications

Consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Boone, 2013; Chen et al., 2012), we found positive associations among insecure attachment, shame, socially prescribed perfectionism, and perfectionistic

self-presentation. Compared with secure individuals, insecurely attached individuals are more self-critical and tend to perceive large discrepancies between their self-image and their ideal self-standards (Mikulincer, 1995). Bowlby (1980) emphasized that the enduring quality of early attachment relationships gives rise to powerful emotions such as shame, especially when associated with threatened or real rejection or loss. In addition, the significant associations between interpersonal perfectionism (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionistic self-presentation) and shame are consistent with the notion that failure to live up to the perfectionistic ideals and standards can result in overwhelming feelings of shame (Kohut, 1972). The unrelenting striving for perfection or perfectionist self-image is considered a strategy to “avoid shame and humiliation for not living up to an archaic, grandiose view of the self” (Sorotzkin, 1985, p. 564). On the other hand, the non-significant or negative association between dismissing and fearful attachment and need for belongingness is consistent with the notion that these individuals may have learned to inhibit their desire for belongingness in order to mitigate negative affect and potential threats to self-esteem (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

In the present study, we also found further support for the PSDM that preoccupied individuals may react to their thwarted belongingness and feelings of shame by actively promoting their supposed perfection or not displaying or hiding flaws and imperfection. These findings suggest that perfectionistic behavior and self-presentation may stem from unmet needs for belongingness (Hewitt et al., 2006, 2014). People with a history of insecure attachment may strive to maintain a perfect or flawless façade, such that others will come to respect and accept them and fulfil their psychological needs (Hewitt et al., 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These individuals may continue to employ maladaptive impression management strategies such as perfectionistic self-presentation until their basic psychological needs are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ironically, these perfectionistic behaviors often create even greater disconnection and isolation, as illustrated in previous studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2012; Mackinnon & Sherry, 2012).

4.2. Limitations and future directions

There are several noteworthy limitations in our study. First, due to the cross-sectional nature of our study, no definite conclusions can be drawn concerning the stability of the mediated effects found in this study. Second, our findings are based entirely on self-report measures. Furthermore, internal consistencies of the Nondisclosure of Imperfection subscale and the attachment measure were relatively low in this study ($\alpha s = .53$ –.67). And finally, our sample consisted of entirely undergraduate students.

Considering the limitations above, we propose the following suggestions for future research. First, levels of shame and need for belongingness may be experimentally manipulated in order to observe their effects on perfectionism among individuals with different attachment styles. Second, dispositional or trait measures of shame should be examined in future studies. People who experience chronic shame may be more motivated to project a perfect or flawless façade compared to those who experience less dispositional shame. And finally, the present findings need to be replicated beyond undergraduate populations as well as in longitudinal studies.

4.3. Conclusion

Socially prescribed perfectionism and perfectionistic self-presentation may be driven by insecurely attached individuals' inordinate need for belongingness and to avoid feelings of shame. The present findings also highlight the importance of assessing and

targeting attachment relationships and the expression of shame when treating perfectionistic individuals.

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