

Reframing the Perfectionist's Catch-22 Dilemma: A Systems Thinking Approach

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Perfectionist tendencies present a particular challenge to gifted and talented children. The complexity of perfectionism, however, acts as an impediment to agreement on the nature of the phenomenon and on the development of strategies to ameliorate its effects. This article uses systems thinking to examine the dynamic complexity of perfectionism. These dynamics are explained as an attempt by the perfectionist to achieve cognitive consistency. The unrealistic world view of a perfectionist generates a catch-22 situation that makes change difficult. Rather than change their world view, perfectionists are more likely to attempt to change their behavior or their levels of self-esteem. Fundamental change requires a world view that balances performance and learning, and this involves changing views on performance and failure. The article discusses how such fundamental change might be achieved effectively.

Introduction

Perfectionism represents a significant challenge both to educators desiring to help learners strive for excellence and to researchers seeking to build an understanding of the phenomenon. It is imperative that we achieve a greater understanding of perfectionism, given the dysfunctional behavior with which it is associated (Burns, 1980; Greenspon, 2000a). Perfectionism has been linked to underachievement in education (Adderholdt-Elliot, 1989; Davis & Rim, 1994), depression (Blatt, 1995), eating disorders (Halmi et al., 2000), and suicide (Delisle, 1990); and its effects are often associated with extremely able students (Adderholdt & Goldberg, 1999). While it has been suggested that perfectionism can be *normal* (Hamachek, 1978) and *positive* (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Newbauer, 1993), we are concerned with the way perfectionism undermines lifelong learning and with interventions that minimize its harmful effects.

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There is little question that something needs to be done, yet knowing what to do is hampered by the complexity of the phenomenon. Educational literature contains a range of definitions of perfectionism, along with a variety of alternative strategies for ameliorating its effects. A significant challenge for anyone wanting to take thoughtful action is to develop a model of perfectionism that integrates existing knowledge into a complete picture. The aim of this article is to generate such a model based on application of *systems thinking*, a tool for understanding complexity (Senge, 1990).

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking arose during the 20th century as scientists became aware of the limitations of analysis as an approach to inquiry (Ackoff, 1997). Since the Renaissance, analysis has been the preferred approach to scientific thinking in Western nations. The word *analysis* stems from a Greek word meaning *loosen* or *undo*, meaning to break something into its component parts.

The opposite of analysis is synthesis, the bringing together of parts into a whole. Clearly, analysis and synthesis ought to be complementary: Where something has been broken into parts, those parts need to be brought back together again. However, over time, any community forms a culture: a pattern of unconsciously held preferences for one way of thinking over another. Deconstructing those things we wish to understand has become part of the culture of Western nations, in particular of English-speaking democracies, such as Great Britain, the United States of America, and New Zealand (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993).

The effect of this culture is that synthesis is often neglected. Having broken something up into component parts, the Western scientist who seeks further understanding then breaks the parts up into their components. Analysis produces long lists of elements, all of which need to be considered in establishing what needs to be done in a particular situation. This is what Senge (1990) described as *detail complexity*: The more we understand, the more elements we see, with each element separate from those around it.

Systems thinking aims to inquire into the system as a whole. It helps synthesis by focusing not on the elements of something, but on the relationships or interactions between the elements and between the thing and its environment. Where analysis concentrates on *how* a thing works, synthesis and systems thinking seek to reveal *why* it works as it does. This involves shifting from a concern

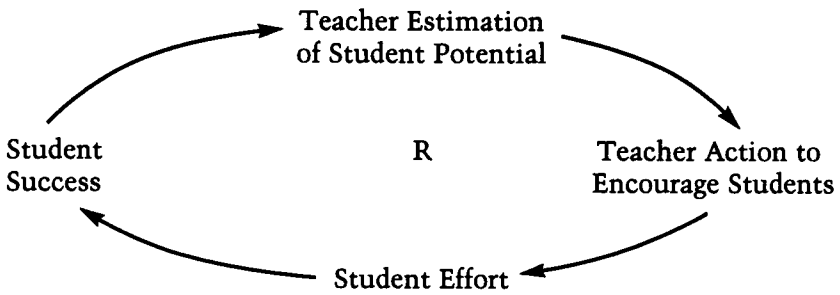


Figure 1: A reinforcing loop.

for detail complexity to a concern for *dynamic complexity*: concern for dynamic relationships, rather than fine distinctions.

Another fundamental difference between systems thinking and analysis is that causality is viewed as circular, rather than linear. In analysis, we often find ourselves in arguments over whether A causes B or B causes A. For instance, one researcher may investigate the extent to which teacher behavior influences students, where another investigates how student behavior influences teachers. Systems thinking seeks to acknowledge both influences: The student influences the teacher who influences the student who influences the teacher. Causal loop diagrams (CLDs) are used to graphically chart the relationships in a way that allows complex dynamics to be expressed with greater clarity. A CLD for the relationship between teacher and student described above is shown in Figure 1.

The arrows in the CLD indicate the direction of causality. A change in Teacher Estimation of Student Potential will cause a change in Teacher Actions to Encourage Students. The R in the center of the loop indicates that the loop is reinforcing: The interaction between the variables in this loop generates change that reinforces itself. So, if one variable starts to grow, it leads to growth of the other variables, which generates growth of the variable we started with, and so on. Some loops we will encounter are balancing; that is, one variable causes another to grow that causes the original to decline, bringing the system into balance. In our CLDs, we indicate where loops are balancing with a B.

Notice that the variables used in the CLD are broad statements, such as Teacher Action to Encourage Students. Analytical thinking might encourage "inward" exploration to find, for instance, the kinds of actions that might be involved, generating a detailed list of the different strategies teachers use and the effectiveness of each

strategy. Systems thinking is more likely to keep variables broad and inquire *outward* to find other variables in the environment surrounding teacher and student that influence a teacher's actions.

Inward inquiry provides finer and finer distinctions about the subject of interest, enabling clearer description of its nature. Outward inquiry provides context and meaning for the subject, explaining how it develops and is maintained and where intervention will have the greatest impact. These are two different views, each with a contribution to make toward a complete understanding of the subject. Until now, research into perfectionism has concentrated on descriptive *inward* studies, with little emphasis on intervention (Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002).

Gould, Voyer, and Ford (1998) provided an example of how this outward exploration can aid in developing effective interventions. They used systems thinking to deepen understanding of anxiety in the workplace. Their approach enabled them to reshape successfully the system that was generating and perpetuating anxiety. Previous attempts to control anxiety had unintentionally aggravated the condition. The systemic, outward view enabled them to find effective, enduring interventions. Consider what we can learn if we take a systems thinking view of perfectionism.

Problems With Definitions

Considerable discussion has taken place in academic literature on how perfectionism is best defined. Some researchers make the distinction between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism (Parker, 1997), where others, notably Greenspon (2000), consider all perfectionism to be unhealthy. According to Greenspon, what some call *healthy perfectionism* is really the desirable pursuit of excellence, something quite different from perfectionism. Why does this disagreement exist when both are seeking to describe the same process?

One cause of the disagreement lies in their preferences regarding inward and outward modes of inquiry. Both Greenspon (2000a) and Parker (1997) agree on the destructive potential of perfectionism. They see perfectionism as characterised by unrealistic efforts to achieve high standards, along with an unremitting search for acceptance through perfect performance. And they agree that perfectionism is linked with such outcomes as underachievement, low self-esteem, avoidance of risk, and burnout. Confusion arises because there is a great deal of commonality in behavior between

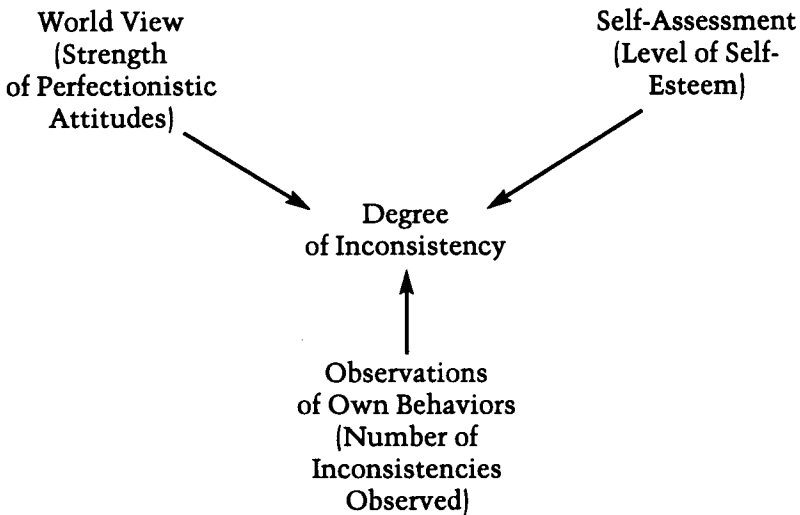


Figure 2. Perfectionistic variables.

people who are bound up in destructive processes and ones who pursue high standards in a sustainable way. Greenspon has responded to the confusion by inquiring outward, in effect asking, "What else, in combination with behavior, makes up the system that generates these destructive outcomes?" He sees behavior as important, yet not sufficient to explain what is happening.

Greenspon's (2000b) outward-inquiry approach reflects the philosophical base of systems thinking, and he states that, in psychological terms, perfectionism refers to "the organizing principle that unless one is perfect, one is worthless as a person" (p. 180). We will adopt the extended definition of perfectionism given by Burns (1980), one that is consistent with Greenspon's view:

Perfectionists . . . are those whose standards are high beyond reach or reason, people who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment. For these people, the drive to excel can only be self-defeating. (p. 34)

Burns' definition identifies behavior as an important element of perfectionism when he refers to compulsive *straining*. He also encompassed attitudes when referring to unreachable standards and to self-assessment when referring to measuring one's worth. To understand the dynamics affecting perfectionistic students, there-

fore, we consider their behavior, attitudes, and assessments that they make of themselves. Work by cognitive psychologists, such as Festinger (1957), has established that people seek consistency in their lives. Thus, as shown in Figure 2, perfectionistic students—along with the rest of us—work to achieve consistency among their attitudes making up their world view, the observations they make of their own behavior, and their self-assessments.

A number of crucial attitudes contribute to the world view of perfectionists. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- It is important to be a worthwhile person;
- To be worthwhile, a person must do everything perfectly; and
- Worthwhile people do not lower their standards.

These attitudes create the context for dynamics that have been described in educational literature on perfectionism. Imagine that a young student holds a world view as outlined above. During the early years of schooling, the student might be told that her performance on assigned work is perfect. Because her observations of her own behavior are that she achieves excellence in everything that is asked of her, the student can hold such a world view—indeed, it can become stronger—while maintaining high levels of self-esteem.

As time goes by, however, cognitive challenge of the work intensifies, and she is exposed to competition with other high achievers. Instead of getting 100% on tests, she gets 90%. She observes that her performance is less than perfect. The result is a degree of inconsistency. She holds as a world view the attitudes listed above: Her self-assessment is that she is a worthwhile person, yet her behavior as measured by the test is less than perfect. The built-in desire for consistency demands that one or more of these factors must change. Figure 3 shows the possibilities.

Loops B1, B2, and B3 represent the different options the student has for dealing with the inconsistency she is experiencing. Each of these is a balancing loop, that is, they are designed to bring feelings of inconsistency back into balance, not allow them to grow. Her first option is likely to be B1, endeavoring to change her behavior so that there are fewer examples of imperfect performance to observe and, thus, reduced inconsistency. For our student, action to change behavior might mean working harder at the subject to raise her test mark to 100%. In doing that, she acts in the same way as a classmate with a different world view who enjoys striving for high standards, but who does not believe her self-worth is determined by success on tests. In other words, our perfectionist student's behav-

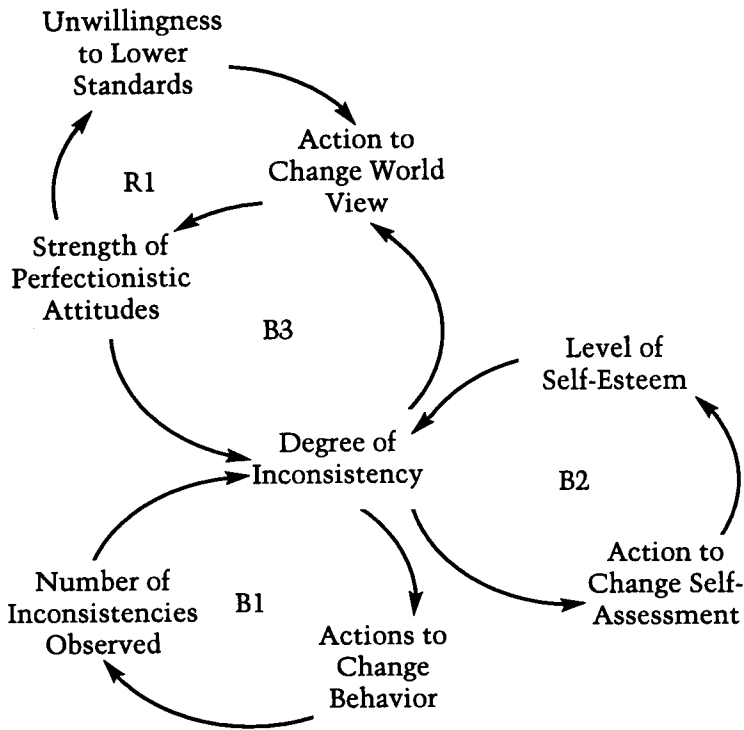


Figure 3. The structure of perfectionism.

ior may falsely appear to be a healthy concern for excellence. However, "action to change behavior" might include dropping subjects where she suspects she will not perform perfectly or withdrawing from activities that involve risk of failure (Adderholdt & Goldberg, 1999).

While activation of loop B1 may provide some temporary respite from the discomfort of inconsistency, there is little hope of permanent relief. Our perfectionist student is not, in actuality, perfect; so she will continue to be confronted with observations of her own imperfect behavior.

Loop B2 provides an alternative path toward consistency. Here, the student changes her self-assessment, deciding perhaps that she is not perfect and, therefore, not a worthwhile person. B2, however, does not offer a permanent solution. Her world view includes the attitude that it is important to be worthwhile. So, she is likely to consider her nonworthwhile state a dreadful secret that needs to be kept from parents and teachers, who consider her to be not only

worthwhile, but also an excellent student (Reis, 1987). Her self-assessment is that she is not worthwhile but that she really wants to be, so she heads back into attempts to change behavior. Perfectionist students thus oscillate between determined action to be perfect and misery based on deeply negative self-assessments.

The actions the perfectionist takes to make her behavior consistent with her world view and her self-assessment may become more and more dramatic. It could involve focusing her attention on an area where she can control her behavior, such as her eating. In some extreme cases, in an effort to bring her behavior in line with her self-assessment that she is not worthwhile and her belief that it is important to be worthwhile, perfectionists have ended their lives. Is there any way out of this destructive process?

Changing World Views

Fundamental resolution to the inconsistency lies in change to the student's world view (loop B3). And yet, rather than changing the perfectionist attitudes that are at the root of her discomfort, our student continues to oscillate between B1 and B2. What prevents her from working through the process shown in B3?

As shown in loop R1, a perfectionist's world view will also influence her willingness to change her attitudes. In particular, if she believes that worthwhile people do not lower their standards, she will resist efforts to convince her that perfect performance is not necessary, that she should "ease up on herself." Perfectionist beliefs, therefore, become a self-perpetuating trap that prevents learners from taking the one action that will bring about fundamental relief from the inconsistencies in their lives. How can people working with perfectionists help them to break free from this trap?

Analytical thinking, with its linear approach to causality, might encourage teachers and parents to work on the self-assessment of a student. Because many of the destructive behaviors involved in perfectionism stem from a student's feeling that she is not worthwhile, it appears appropriate to build up her self-esteem by convincing her that she is worthwhile. The circular causality of the CLD in Figure 3 suggests that this approach is unlikely to bring about a long-term solution. If action could be taken to make the Level of Self-Esteem more positive, what would result? The CLD harmonizes with Burns' (1980) observations that perfectionists are not helped by encouragement to "ease off" or "lighten up on themselves." According to the CLD, doing so would *increase* the degree of inconsistency, com-

elling the student to activate either B1 or B2 once more.

Systems thinking refers to such action as *low leverage* because there is little long-term result from the effort expended. Effort to increase a student's self-esteem might have an immediate impact, but problems soon return, requiring even more effort. Where can we act with greater leverage?

The CLD indicates that fundamental change requires action to change the student's world view, but this is prevented from happening by loop R1. Leverage lies, therefore, in finding a way past the blocking effect of R1 and the unwillingness to lower standards. Consider how this might be done.

Performance, Learning, and Experience

The student is trapped because she is unwilling to lower her standards. Her world view does not allow her to take this action. If, however, a change can be framed as a *raising* of standards, the perfectionist is likely to be more willing—indeed, may feel compelled—to make it. A new world view can be framed as a raising of standards by showing a student that her existing beliefs are incomplete.

This reframing is relatively straightforward because a world view that puts such a high value on performance is incomplete based on research into sustainable work. According to Gallwey (2000), sustainable work requires a balance of performance, learning, and experience. Performance involves using whatever capacity one has to meet the demands of the situation. Learning, on the other hand, is about growing one's capacity in preparation for future, more challenging demands. Experience refers to the quality of life people feel they have while engaged in work. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), optimal experiences occur when demands and capacity are balanced, requiring people to be able to give attention to both performance and learning.

Perfectionism does not seek this balance. Rather, a perfectionist student will consistently give priority to performing, rather than to learning. This is because learning is closely associated with failure (Fritz, 1991); and, from a perfectionist's world view, failure is an indication that a person is imperfect and, therefore, not worthwhile. Indeed, fear of failure is consistently identified as a defining characteristic of perfectionism (Greenspon, 2000).

Perfectionists often adopt strategies that enable them to perform without learning. For instance, they may only take subjects in

which they have proved themselves to be capable. They will avoid projects that require them to learn new skills. They will avoid working with other people, even though this might provide a rich learning environment. When working in groups, they do not feel they are in control of the performance of the group as a whole and often feel compelled to do all the work of the group to ensure it meets their standards. With each of these strategies, perfectionists give up opportunities for learning in order to maximize their performance.

Similarly, perfectionists are prepared to drive themselves through stressful conditions in order to maximize performance. They may go without sleep and deny themselves leisure periods. They may try to motivate themselves by refusing to get satisfaction from work that contains any flaws. These strategies sacrifice the quality of their work experience in order to maximize performance.

So, there is a body of literature supporting a belief that error-free or perfect performance is not sufficient for sustainable work. This literature is supported by evidence in the lives of perfectionists themselves who can see that the behaviors in which they feel compelled to engage are not sustainable but, rather, lead to burnout. The literature and the perfectionist's own experiences provide a basis for saying that *truly* worthwhile people may not only perform outstandingly, but also ensure that they are learning and having a high-quality experience.

In work we have done with individual students who manifest perfectionist beliefs, they have been helped to make considerable progress on the basis of the systems thinking view discussed here (Ramsey, Franklin, Ramsey, & Wells, 2002). In particular, we have encouraged students to view grades as a measure of one aspect of their work: their performance in relation to the demands we as teachers have made. Because students are in the best—and possibly only—position to measure how much they are learning and the quality of their experience, we ask them to give themselves grades in each of these areas for assigned work they complete.

In cases where perfectionist students give themselves grades for learning and experience—to go with the performance grades we have given them—they initially report they are scoring highly on performance and poorly in the other two areas. They also report that they feel free to set goals for themselves that are different from any they had set in the past. For example, they were able to aim to improve the grades they were giving themselves for experience, while maintaining B grades for performance. Previously, they had only set themselves goals for improved performance.

Further Research

Perfectionism is a relentless and unsustainable quest for acceptance that often affects students who are gifted and used to performing to the highest standards (Adderholdt & Goldberg, 1999). Further inquiry into how perfectionist students can be helped is vital, and systems thinking gives some significant indications as to where we can most effectively target our efforts.

Further work is needed to develop holistic grading procedures that address all three areas (i.e., performance, learning, and experience). While individual cases show that this method has potential to help perfectionist students out of the trap created by their world view, experience suggests that the technique is difficult to institutionalize in educational settings where learners are consistently told that performance is all that really matters and where rewards are allocated based solely on performance.

Work with perfectionists needs to go beyond helping them to see the need for balancing performance, learning, and experience. While a student may intellectually grasp the need for learning, more work will be needed to help him or her become desensitized to failure.

Improvisational drama is an area in which the authors are undertaking research. This work in progress holds promise for helping with the process of desensitization. Improvisational drama disrupts a student's normal reaction to failure in a number of ways. It usually takes place within an environment that expects and even celebrates failure. To be successful, improvisation cannot be scripted or prepared in advance (Newton, 1999). For this reason, participants are encouraged to treat failure as a normal part of the process. Delivering scripted responses—ones that have been thought out in advance—is treated as one of the few things a student can do that is wrong.

"My Word, Your Word" is an example of an improvisational game where players must respond to the events of the moment. In pairs, they alternate turns to create a story, one word at a time. Trying to force the outcome cannot work because each player has no control over the participation of the other. The story is lost if players stop concentrating on what is being said in the present moment. Scripted storylines become impossible. Perfectionistic attempts to control outcomes immediately backfire, so success comes from flexibility and real-time responsiveness.

Participants can be told that failure is a sign they are approaching the work correctly. In this way, improvisational drama, unlike most activities in which a perfectionist might engage, *requires* the stu-

dent to experience failure in order to achieve successful outcomes.

Improvisational drama may appear to be full of risk for some perfectionist students, and those students may be tempted to withdraw from the activities. Therefore, research is required to establish procedures that invite participation and introduce students to the area in measured amounts that limit the quantity of risk they must tolerate.

Systems thinking is a discipline that encourages researchers to be expansive in their thinking. Such an approach is evidently needed in addressing the complex challenges of perfectionism. As we have seen, the view of perfectionism presented in this article focuses attention on the fundamental inconsistencies inherent in the world view of perfectionists. Educators are encouraged to explore strategies that help perfectionists break out of the catch-22 dilemma this world view creates.

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