



## Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perfectionism and life satisfaction in South Korean adults

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Our aim in this study was to provide a better understanding of the links among self-oriented and self-critical perfectionism and life satisfaction by examining the mediating effect of self-efficacy in this relationship. We collected survey results from 300 adults in South Korea and conducted structural equation modeling. The results show that participants' self-efficacy mediated the path from self-oriented perfectionism and self-critical perfectionism to life satisfaction. Further, self-critical perfectionism led directly to life satisfaction. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

### Keywords

perfectionism; life satisfaction; self-efficacy; self-oriented perfectionism; self-critical perfectionism

### Article Highlights

- Among South Korean adults, high self-oriented perfectionism was found to be associated with high life satisfaction through the mediator of high self-efficacy.
- High self-critical perfectionism of South Korean adults was directly related to low life satisfaction.
- High self-critical perfectionism of South Korean adults was associated with low life satisfaction through the mediator of low self-efficacy.

South Korea experienced rapid industrialization and economic growth after the Korean War (1950–1953). This economic success is called the “miracle of the Han River” (Le et al., 2016). In global gross domestic product rankings the economy of South Korea was in 10th place in 2020 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). During this rapid growth in South Korea a competitive achievement-oriented culture was formed. This culture is often cited as the cause of Koreans' low life satisfaction (Rice et al., 2019; Suh, 2007). *Life satisfaction* is the degree to which people are satisfied with various areas of their lives (Suldo & Huebner, 2004). In 2020 South Koreans, particularly those aged in their 20s and 30s (Choi et al., 2020), reported the lowest life satisfaction among the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020).

As well as positive and negative affect, life satisfaction is an important factor in subjective well-being (Diener, 1994). In particular, life satisfaction is a value–evaluative concept such that it is individuals' comparison of their situation with their standards (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Thus, it is greatly influenced by cultural and individual differences (O. Y. Oh, 2015).

*Perfectionism*, which involves extreme striving for perfection (Stoeber & Childs, 2010), affects life satisfaction. It comprises self-oriented perfectionism, an adaptive dimension, and self-critical perfectionism, a maladaptive dimension (Dunkley & Blankstein, 2000). *Self-oriented perfectionists* set personal high standards and goals without great fear of rejection or negative evaluation by others. In contrast, *self-critical perfectionists* are characterized by persistent strict self-monitoring, excessive critical evaluation of their own behavior, dissatisfaction with a successful performance, and habitual concern regarding others' criticism and expectations (Shafique et al., 2017; Sherry et al., 2016). Researchers have reported that adaptive self-oriented perfectionism is associated with high positive emotions and high life satisfaction, and maladaptive self-critical perfectionism is associated with high stress and low life satisfaction (Buliņa, 2014; Chang et al., 2004; Y. K. Oh & Kim, 2014).

Perfectionism has unique aspects regarding cultural context (Wang et al., 2009). Castro and Rice (2003) reported an increase in self-critical perfectionism in people from relatively more collectivist cultures, which include China, Korea, Japan, Costa Rica, and Indonesia. In achievement-oriented cultures, such as South Korea, perfectionism is sometimes regarded as a prerequisite for success (Rice et al., 2019). Therefore, an examination of how perfectionism is related to the life satisfaction of people in South Korea will help in understanding the behavior of those living in similar cultures.

Self-oriented perfectionism may lead to life satisfaction because people become competent and their self-efficacy improves as they try to meet the high standards they set themselves (Buliņa, 2014; Chufar & Pettijohn, 2013). Bandura (1986) defined *self-efficacy* as individuals' belief that they have the ability to cope successfully with various situations. According to Zhang and Cai (2012), low self-efficacy strengthens the maladaptive perfectionism–depression relationship. Self-efficacy may reflect actual performance. Adaptive self-oriented perfectionists perform tasks well and have high self-efficacy (Chufar & Pettijohn, 2013). As people with high self-efficacy expect positive outcomes, their life satisfaction increases (Luszczynska et al., 2005). Empirical studies have shown that high positive perfectionism leads to high life satisfaction through high self-efficacy (Chan, 2007), and high self-oriented perfectionism leads to low procrastination through high self-efficacy (Seo, 2008). Thus, self-efficacy may mediate the link between self-oriented perfectionism and life satisfaction.

Self-critical perfectionism may also be associated with life satisfaction through self-efficacy. However, as this maladaptive perfectionism involves strict self-criticism (Dunkley & Blankstein, 2000), individuals' self-efficacy may be lowered by an underestimation of their own abilities. Previous researchers have reported that maladaptive perfectionism is related to lower self-efficacy (Chufar & Pettijohn, 2013), and high negative perfectionism leads to lower life satisfaction through low self-efficacy (Chan, 2007). Thus, self-efficacy may mediate the relationship between self-critical perfectionism and life satisfaction.

Few researchers have explored the structural relationships among self-oriented and self-critical perfectionism, life satisfaction, and self-efficacy. However, in a study conducted with Chinese gifted students in Hong Kong, Chan (2007) examined the links among positive and negative perfectionism, self-efficacy, and the life satisfaction and positive and negative affect components of subjective well-being. Chan collected data through questionnaires from 7-to-18-year-olds whose teachers had recommended them as gifted, and found that self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between positive and negative perfectionism and subjective well-being. However, perfectionism is a major characteristic of gifted children and is considered to play an important role in their emotional health (Kreger Silverman, 1999). Therefore, caution is required when assessing the similarity of the perfectionism–self-efficacy relationship and life satisfaction of gifted students compared to that of individuals who have not been assessed as gifted, but there has been limited application of Chan's results to an understanding of the behavior of the general population.

Therefore, we tested the mediating effect of self-efficacy in the relationship between the self-oriented and self-critical perfectionism and life satisfaction of the general population in South Korea. Chan (2007) reported finding a stronger mediating effect of self-efficacy in the relationship between gifted children's

positive perfectionism and subjective well-being than between negative perfectionism and subjective well-being. As such, we proposed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** In the preliminary model, self-efficacy will fully mediate the relationship between self-oriented perfectionism and life satisfaction and will partially mediate the relationship between self-critical perfectionism and life satisfaction relationship.

**Hypothesis 2:** In the competitive model, self-efficacy will partially mediate the relationship between self-oriented perfectionism and life satisfaction and will partially mediate the relationship between self-critical perfectionism and life satisfaction.

The preliminary model and the competitive model are shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

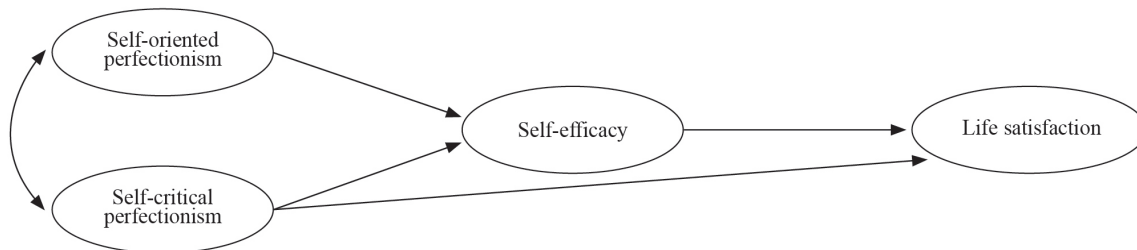


Figure 1. *Preliminary Model*

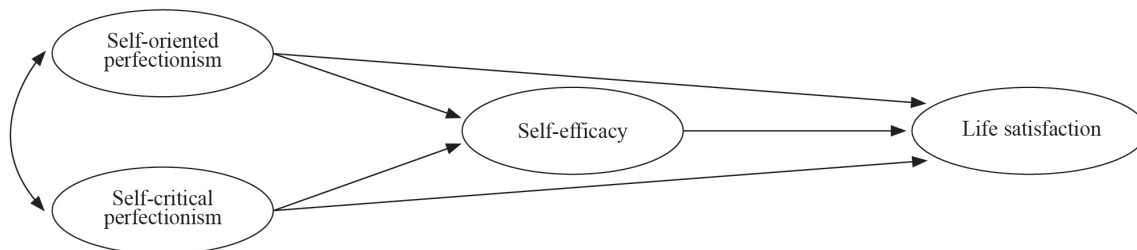


Figure 2. *Competitive Model*

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 300 Korean adults in South Korea who were aged in their 20s and 30s, comprising 150 men and 150 women ( $M_{\text{age}} = 30.33$  years,  $SD = 4.97$ ). Participants' occupations were 53 students, 201 office workers, 17 housewives, and 29 others. As regards education level, 29 were high school graduates, one participant was a college graduate, 232 were university graduates, and 38 held a postgraduate qualification.

### Procedure

We conducted an online survey with participants recruited through Invight, a large Korean online research company with more than 800,000 members. Participants signed the informed consent document, which explained the study purpose in basic language and set out the estimated time that would be taken to

complete the questionnaire. The researchers' email address was provided for participants to express any discomfort or doubts about the study, and to inquire about the results. Responses were used for research purposes only, and there were no penalties for nonparticipation. Those who expressed their intention to participate voluntarily by pressing the "I agree" button, were compensated for their participation with KRW 2,500 (USD 2.00) worth of points available online. Data were processed by random assignment of identification, and no personal identifiable participant information was collected. There was no personal relationship between the researchers and the participants after data collection. The research procedure was approved by the Ajou University Ethics Committee.

## Measures

### **Perfectionism**

Frost et al. (1990) developed the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS) to measure self-oriented and self-critical perfectionism, and this was translated into Korean and validated by Jung (2000). The FMPS personal standards subscale is equivalent to adaptive perfectionism and the FMPS subscales for concern over mistakes and doubts about actions reflect maladaptive perfectionism (Dunkley & Blankstein, 2000). Thus, the former subscale can be a proxy for self-oriented perfectionism and the two latter subscales can be a proxy for self-critical perfectionism.

Following Dunkley and Blankstein (2000), H. Kim and Kim (2011) used the subscale of personal standards (seven items) to measure self-oriented perfectionism and the subscales of concern over mistakes (nine items) and doubts about actions (four items) to measure self-critical perfectionism. We measured self-oriented perfectionism and self-critical perfectionism as in these two prior studies. Participants responded to items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). Sample items are "It is important to me that I be thoroughly competent in everything I do" (self-oriented perfectionism) and "I hate anything unless I'm the best" (self-critical perfectionism). Higher scores were interpreted as high perfectionism. Cronbach's alpha was .90 in Frost et al.'s (1990) study, and in this study it was .82 for self-oriented perfectionism and .87 for self-critical perfectionism.

### **Life Satisfaction**

Diener et al. (1985) developed The Satisfaction with Life Scale. In this study, we measured overall life satisfaction with the five-item Korean version translated by Lim (2012) and validated with Korean populations. Participants assessed five items on a 7-point Likert-style scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). A sample item is "Even if I were reborn, I would live as I am now." Higher scores indicate higher life satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha was .87 in the study by Diener et al. (1985), and .90 in this study.

### **Self-Efficacy**

The 24-item Korean General Self-Efficacy Scale developed by A. Y. Kim and Cha (1996) and A. Y. Kim (1997) was used to measure self-efficacy. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). A sample item is "My judgment on a problem is generally correct." Higher scores were interpreted as higher self-efficacy. Cronbach's alpha was .87 in Kim's (1997) study and .86 in this study.

## Results

We performed structural equation modeling (SEM) using Amos 20.0 to test the measurement model. First, as the subfactors for each measure were not clearly reported, item parcels were created for each latent variable to form indicators. We performed confirmatory factor analysis of each scale to calculate the item factor loadings (Cho & Seo, 2010; Russell et al., 1998). All latent variables had three parcels, except for life satisfaction, which had only two owing to the small number of items, and items were distributed so that the factor loading was the same for each parcel. We then developed and tested a measurement model with a

correlation between all latent variables. Regarding the fit of the measurement model, according to Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) and comparative fit index (CFI), the model had a good fit to the data, TLI = .95, CFI = .97, but the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and 90% confidence intervals (CIs) were both mediocre, RMSEA = .089, 90% CI [0.072, –0.106]. The measurement model was judged to be acceptable (Kline, 2011). Each parcel of variables had factor loadings at a level of significance for the respective latent variables, namely, self-oriented perfectionism = .76–.83, self-critical perfectionism = .87–.90, self-efficacy = .90–.93, and life satisfaction = .86–.98. Descriptive statistics and correlations among latent variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Self-oriented perfectionism	3.06	0.65	—			
2. Self-critical perfectionism	2.83	0.70	.61**	—		
3. Self-efficacy	3.09	0.66	.58**	.14*	—	
4. Life satisfaction	3.83	1.25	.09	–.24**	.41**	—

Note. *N* = 300.  
\* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .001.

We used two SEMs to explore the preliminary and competitive models. The results show that in the preliminary model,  $\chi^2 = 127.68$ , *df* = 39, TLI = .95, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .087, and the competitive model,  $\chi^2 = 127.67$ , *df* = 38, TLI = .95, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .089, the CFI and TLI levels were good and the RMSEA levels were mediocre. Therefore, both models were considered acceptable (Kline, 2011). Because the two models were nested, they were compared using the chi-square difference test to select the model that better fit the data. The competitive (vs. preliminary) model had a smaller chi-square value of .005 and a smaller degree of freedom of 1. When the degree of freedom differs by 1, the critical value is 3.84 (*p* < .05). As the difference between the two models was smaller than this, it was nonsignificant. The self-oriented perfectionism–life satisfaction path in the competitive model was nonsignificant (standardized coefficient = .01, *ns*), and the preliminary model was simpler than the competitive model. Therefore, we adopted the preliminary model as the final model, where all paths were significant. The final model and path coefficients are shown in Figure 3.

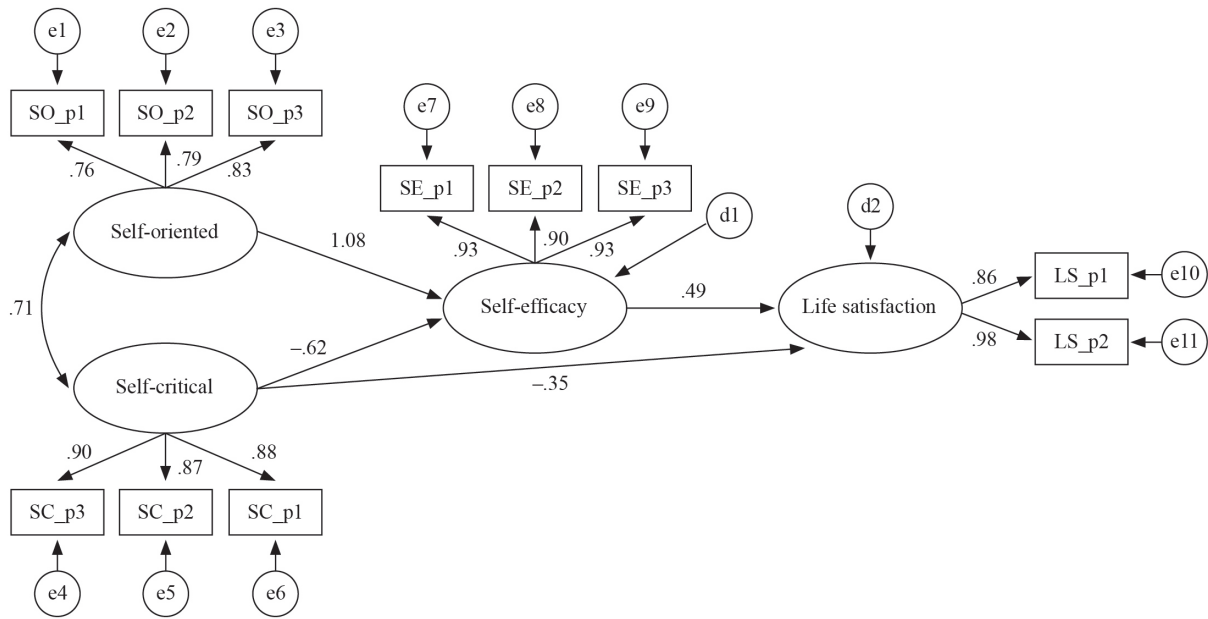


Figure 3. Final Model

Note. SO = self-oriented perfectionism; SC = self-critical perfectionism; SE = self-efficacy; LS = life satisfaction. The figures are standardized coefficients. All paths are significant.

The significance of the indirect effects of self-oriented perfectionism and self-critical perfectionism on life satisfaction through self-efficacy was examined with a bootstrapping analysis. We generated 1,000 resamples from the raw data, and the significance of the indirect effects was tested at 95% CIs (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Paths from both self-oriented perfectionism and from self-critical perfectionism to life satisfaction through self-efficacy were significant. The kappa-squared values showed significant indirect effects of self-oriented perfectionism ( $\kappa^2 = 0.21$ , medium effect size) and self-critical perfectionism ( $\kappa^2 = 0.07$ , small effect size) on life satisfaction (Preacher & Kelley, 2011). The indirect effect was significant (see Table 2).

Table 2. Direct and Indirect Effects of Self-Oriented Perfectionism and Self-Critical Perfectionism on Life Satisfaction

Path	Direct effect	Indirect effect 95% CI	Total effect
Self-oriented perfectionism → Life satisfaction		.530** [0.398, 0.664]	.530**
Self-critical perfectionism → Life satisfaction	-.349**	-.303** [-0.401, -0.214]	-.651**

Note. CI = confidence interval.

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

The implications of our results are follows: First, high self-oriented perfectionism was associated with high life satisfaction through high self-efficacy, whereas high self-critical perfectionism was associated with low life satisfaction through low self-efficacy. Previous studies have shown that self-oriented perfectionism enhances individuals' performance and self-efficacy by striving to meet the high standards those individuals set for themselves (Buliņa, 2014; Chufar & Pettijohn, 2013), and subsequently increases their overall life satisfaction (Chan, 2007; Lecci et al., 1994). However, self-critical perfectionism entails self-blame, which may interfere with performance and lower self-efficacy. Even if a self-critical person's performance is satisfactory, it plays a role in lowering self-efficacy (Buliņa, 2014), owing to a self-blame attitude (Dunkley & Blankstein, 2000), and lowered self-efficacy reduces life satisfaction (Chan, 2007).

Our results show that perfectionists' high standards led to an evaluation of their life, as reflected by life satisfaction (Pavot & Diener, 1993), through the evaluation of their ability, as reflected by self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Unlike our result of a mediating role of self-efficacy, Zhang and Cai (2012) reported that self-efficacy moderated the perfectionism–subjective well-being relationship. We surmise that the difference in results is because of the dependent variables, where we used life satisfaction, which is a subjective evaluation, and Zhang and Cai (2012) used depression, which is an emotional response. The individual's evaluation of self-efficacy played a moderating role in the impact of perfectionist high standards on emotion (i.e., depression; Zhang & Cai, 2012) but a mediating role in the impact of high standards on life evaluation (Chan, 2007).

Second, our results show that highly self-critical perfectionism was directly related to low life satisfaction. Results point to self-blame accompanying self-critical perfectionism, leading to criticism and dissatisfaction in various areas of a person's life. In the study by Zhang and Cai (2012), maladaptive self-critical perfectionism was associated with depression; however, adaptive self-oriented perfectionism was not significantly related to depression. This shows that self-critical (vs. self-oriented) perfectionism is directly associated with subjective well-being.

Self-critical perfectionism may contribute to low life satisfaction of South Koreans, as it involves habitual concern about others' evaluations and expectations. In Korea's collectivist culture, people should consider themselves harmonious in the eyes of their family and others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Suh, 2007). In addition, in the United States, although Asian Americans are relatively closer to collectivism, they do not differ from Caucasian and African Americans in self-oriented perfectionism, but they do score higher on self-critical perfectionism (Castro & Rice, 2003).

In South Korea, people value continual effort and perfectionism, through which many achievements have been made. Nevertheless, others' (mainly family) expectations for perfection exist, and there are many collectivist values to live up to in the Korean culture. Wang et al. (2009) also showed that China's collectivist culture is related to the perfectionism of the people, and pointed out the discrepancy between a person's expectations and actual abilities. Our results show that self-critical perfectionism was significantly related to life satisfaction regardless of level of self-efficacy, providing a framework for understanding cultures in which, despite many achievements and competencies, life satisfaction is low.

In a study with gifted Chinese students, Chan (2007) found that self-oriented perfectionism was also directly related to students' life satisfaction. In Korean studies, the correlations between self-oriented perfectionism and life satisfaction have been reported as both nonsignificant (Nam & Park, 2020) and significant (Y. K. Oh & Kim, 2014), so that findings are not consistent. Thus, the relationship between self-oriented perfection and life satisfaction may be regulated by a third variable.

There are several limitations in this study. First, it is difficult to infer causality with only one measurement of the variables. Longitudinal studies should be undertaken for further verification. Second, because we conducted this study with Korean adults in their 20s and 30s, the age group that has been identified as

having the lowest life satisfaction, caution should be exercised if these results are applied to Korean adults of all ages. Because greater perfectionistic strivings have been found in younger (vs. older) adults (Robinson et al., 2021), the possibility that the relationship between perfectionism and life satisfaction was overestimated in this study should also be considered. Future studies with a wider age range are required. Third, our results suggest, according to the literature, that there is a relationship of Korean culture with perfectionism and life satisfaction. Future researchers should examine these considerations in an empirical cross-cultural study.

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