

RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

The problem with perfection

Published 18 January 2021



Dr Thomas Curran is Assistant Professor at the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at LSE. A British Psychological Society chartered social psychologist, his primary area of expertise is the personality characteristic of perfectionism, how it develops, and how it impacts on mental health.

To be perfect means to be without blemish, fault or weakness, and who would argue that this is not a worthy goal? Yet for many, the strive for perfectionism can lead to negative thoughts, unhappiness and poor mental health. **Thomas Curran** speaks about his research into the dark side of perfectionist culture.

For many people, perfectionism is an asset. It is commonly used in the workplace to describe dedication, attention to detail, or extremely high standards for yourself and others - goals to aspire to if you want to be successful.

But Dr Thomas Curran wants us to challenge this view. Research he conducted with Andrew Hill into perfectionism culture in the UK and US since the mid-1990s has revealed that increasing numbers of people are experiencing “multidimensional perfectionism”. This describes a phenomenon where three kinds of perfectionism are simultaneously endured, meaning we are surrounded by endless pressure to reach unobtainable levels of achievement measured against ever-widening criteria.

Dr Curran cites three dimensions of perfectionism conceptualised by psychologists Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett: socially prescribed perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and self-oriented perfectionism. Each dimension has a different pressure point: socially prescribed perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect; other-oriented perfectionists place high-demands on other people; and self-oriented perfectionists expect flawlessness of themselves.



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Aiming for perfection can have a personal toll

Making the best of oneself sounds like an admirable goal. However Dr Curran's research has found that when people fail – especially in the presence of others – they feel a profound sense of guilt and shame for what they perceive to be a defective performance from a flawed self. Furthermore, his findings connect the rise of perfectionism to the growing number of cases of mental illnesses – such as eating disorders, anxiety and depression – particularly among young people.

Each form of perfectionism comes with “negative baggage” Dr Curran says, but this is particularly acute with those that suffer from socially prescribed perfectionism. “Socially prescribed perfectionists don't feel valued in social situations and have a chronic need for other people's approval, while being extremely down on their implicit value,” he says.

While some may view perfectionism as a “necessary evil” that helps people become highly successful, Dr Curran argues that this is a myth, and that in fact perfectionism can be detrimental to performance and health. “There is a lot of evidence to say you are not going to get any real performance benefit from perfectionism, and that it's actually really damaging for lots of people,” he adds.

In his upcoming book, *Imperfect*, Dr Curran focuses on the culture of perfectionism and the wider environmental factors that have led to its rise. One of the book's major themes is an exploration of why levels of socially-prescribed perfectionism have shown a marked increase since the mid-1990s.

“I found that our world has become increasingly globalised over the last 25 years, with the opening up of borders to trade and employment, and much higher levels of travel,” he explains. “In the past we were judged more on a local scale, but with the opening of economies what we are seeing is that people are being exposed to these additional global ideals of perfection.”

Is perfectionism a 21st century problem?

Dr Curran emphasises the fact that many aspects of capitalism, such as competitive markets, materialism and consumer culture, have existed for most of the post-war era. But whether you are applying for a university, buying a car, or pursuing a career, 21st century globalised cultures have widened the lens of comparison beyond our immediate peers.

The constant presence of social media in people's lives since the late 2000s has also accelerated this trend he stresses: “Images of others at carefully selected moments of their lives has distorted our perceptions of their lifestyles and careers.

“We are surrounded by these images and messages all the time, and have internalised unrealistic ideals and values. It is one of the reasons why we have seen a rapid rise of socially prescribed perfectionism and a lot of its allied mental health issues, such as negative body image, anorexia as well as malignant forms of mental health. Perfectionism is one piece of the puzzle when you think about some of the cultural changes we've seen in the past two decades.”



By shifting the focus away from the individual to the social factors, Dr Curran aims to challenge the idea that these problems originate within ourselves, so that we can better understand the culture that gave rise to them.

“Perfection is impossible, but it can do real damage. I think that if we can challenge our own perfectionist tendencies, and be more honest and realistic with ourselves, our own better mental health and happiness will follow.” ■

Thomas Curran was speaking to Peter Carrol, Media Relations Officer at LSE.

Is perfect the enemy of the possible? Hear Thomas Curran in this episode of the LSE IQ podcast.

Watch the film **Is perfectionism an illness?** on LSE Player.

Thomas Curran's forthcoming book **Imperfect** is due to be published by Profile in 2021.

Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time by Tom Curran and Andrew Hill was published in 2017 by the American Psychological Association.

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