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A Semantic Field of Perfectionism as a Social and Psychological Concept in Academic Discourse

Yulia A. Filyasova  Saint-Petersburg State University of Economics,
30-32 Griboyedov Canal Embankment, Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation, 191023 phill.yield@gmail.com

Abstract. The paper considers perfectionism as a large semantic paradigm comprised of several conceptual categories which belong to the three major scientific areas: sociology, psychology, and medicine. The interest to perfectionism has been increasing progressively since mid-2000s, probably, due to accelerating global economic growth and heightened competition. Though perfectionism may seem immediately obvious to be a positive, socially relevant personal characteristic, psychological studies claim the opposite. Theoretical value of this research is that perfectionism was analyzed as a cross-disciplinary phenomenon on the material of a large academic database; that gave an opportunity to shed light on important semantic areas which outline a semantic field of the concept under analysis. The results of a componential analysis show that perfectionism as a dogmatic term occurred as a result of accumulated philosophical views based on the concept of perfection and idealistic goals. Contextual collocations in academic discourse, however, give evidence of destructive cognitive patterns and unattainability of personally and socially relevant goals. The heaviest forms of perfectionism are described as clinical disorders related to physical, mental, and social dysfunctions. Despite the fact that the majority of studies are conducted in the field of psychology, results of semantic field analysis show that perfectionism characterizes certain social population categories and has serious social implications.

Keywords: perfectionism, academic discourse, interdisciplinary study, semantic field, componential analysis, contextual collocations, categorization

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Семантическое поле перфекционизма как социально-психологического концепта в научном дискурсе

Ю.А. Филисова  

Санкт-Петербургский государственный экономический университет,
191023, Российская Федерация, г. Санкт-Петербург, наб. канала Грибоедова, 30–32
 phill.yield@gmail.com

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается перфекционизм как крупная семантическая парадигма, включающая несколько понятийных категорий, принадлежащих трем основным научным областям: психологии, медицине и социологии. Интерес к проблеме перфекционизма постепенно возрастает с середины 2000-х годов, вероятно, вследствие растущего глобального экономического роста и повышенной конкуренции. Несмотря на то, что перфекционизм может показаться на первый взгляд положительным, социально значимым личностным качеством, психологические исследования свидетельствуют об обратном. Теоретическая значимость данного исследования заключается в том, что перфекционизм рассмотрен как междисциплинарное явление на материале большой академической базы данных; это дало возможность проследить важные семантические области, которые включают не только психологические, но и социальные аспекты. Результаты компонентного анализа показывают, что перфекционизм как догматический термин сложился в результате накопленных философских взглядов, основанных на представлении о совершенстве и идеалистичных целях. Контекстные словосочетания в научном дискурсе свидетельствуют о деструктивных когнитивных паттернах и недостижении личностных и социально значимых целей. Наиболее тяжелые формы перфекционизма описываются как клинические расстройства, относящиеся к психологическим, умственным и социальным дисфункциям. Несмотря на то, что большинство исследований выполняются в области психологии, результаты анализа семантического поля показывают, что перфекционизм характеризует определенные категории населения и имеет серьезные социальные последствия.

Ключевые слова: перфекционизм, научный дискурс, междисциплинарное исследование, семантическое поле, компонентный анализ, контекстные словосочетания, категоризация

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Introduction

According to general theory of language, there are complex relations between encoded and inferred meanings due to various factors such as extension and reduction of code, pragmatic context differentiation, and levels of decoding [1]. Recent studies show strong simplification tendencies in linguistic description

of categories [2]. Evolutionally, a linguistic mechanism of redundancy in articulation is associated with extension, abstraction and increase of the meaning potential [3]. Studying language functioning in different areas of human activity generated a separate branch, cognitive linguistics, which helps understand cognition through social and humanitarian sciences [4] by applying various methods of language analysis such as experimental studies, corpora, interviews, questionnaires, case studies, observation, among others [5]. Language makes it possible to form direct correlations between conceptual and cognitive models [6]. Language itself, arguably, has a significant impact on human cognition [7]. Cognitive language processing is a powerful tool which is applicable to different levels of abstraction and semantic decoding in multimodal communication [8], active language processes [9] such as desemantisation [10].

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach deals with discourse in order to identify key semantic concepts. Experiments in pragmatic processing give evidence that semantic relevance increases language processing [11]. Semantic analysis helps reveal meanings of lexemes which are hidden in a certain contextual environment, though they are implied by native speakers when a word occurs in their mind [12], for example, ‘virus’, ‘bacteria’, ‘germs’, ‘disease’ [13], ‘change’ [14], supernatural [15]. Collocations, grammatical constructions and functional distribution of words are considered in order to understand connotational meanings of terms, such as ‘feminist’ [16], ‘power’ [17]. In addition, discourse analysis of vocabulary and their functional patterns are studied in order to establish transtextual semantic relations of interdisciplinary concepts, such as ‘floods’ and ‘wildfires’ [18], or in order to differentiate specifics of term usage in pharmaceutical context and applied linguistics for academic purposes [19]. Discourse analysis is useful for revealing intradisciplinary variations of lexical bundles across genres [20]. Conventional conceptions about meaning of certain grammatical classes can be different in academic context from general language use [21]; similarly, lexical collocations in academic discourse sometimes differ from dictionary descriptions of terms [22].

Lexical-semantic field analysis is an effective method enabling researchers to examine concepts on cross-disciplinary and diachronic bases [23–25], to study words belonging to a certain lexical layer [26]. A semantic field approach gives an opportunity to categorize lexis into hierarchically structured systems on the basis of their meaning [27], common perception principles [28], colligation and culture [29].

Material and Methods

The aim of this paper is to consider the lexical-semantic field of the concept ‘perfectionism’ on the basis of their dictionary entries and academic descriptions in research papers devoted to investigation of various aspects of this phenomenon.

With this aim in mind, perfectionism as a concept was analyzed in dictionaries [30–32], along with the other word forms from this paradigm, and their similarities and differences were identified. Method of componential analysis was applied to establish minimal semantic units.

As for academic context, the most relevant research papers were studied from one of the largest databases for academic literature [33]. For the moment of study, the topic ‘perfectionism’ was discussed in 4807 documents (docs). ‘Perfectionism’ was introduced for searching keywords, related to the topic, which were further classified into semantic categories. The total number of keywords under analysis was 28157. Quantitative analysis and semantic categorization were used as study methods for semantic field description.

Results

According to the data obtained from the database [33], the interest to the phenomenon of perfectionism appeared in the mid-1940-s, though it was not in the focus of close attention until the mid-1990s. Actually, perfectionism as a topic of research gained momentum in 2004 when the annual amount of papers exceeded one hundred. Currently, there are authors who have over 30 publications on this topic: R.O. Frost, E.C. Chang, R. Shafran, T.D. Wade, M.M. Smith, P.L. Hewitt, J.S. Ashby, S.J. Egan, A.P. Hill, K.G. Rice, S.B. Sherry, J. Stober, G.L. Flett, among others. Perfectionism is mainly studied in psychology (2773 docs), medicine (1908 docs), social sciences (962 docs), arts and humanities (621 docs), neuroscience (203 docs), business, management and accounting (112 docs), nursing (111 docs), health professions (110 docs), and genetics (82 docs).

Definition Analysis

Perfectionism is defined [30] as a doctrine that the perfection of moral character constitutes a person’s highest good; as the theological doctrine that a state of freedom from sin is attainable on earth; a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable; the setting of unrealistically demanding goals accompanied by a disposition to regard failure to achieve them as unacceptable and a sign of personal worthlessness. Synonyms of perfectionism are purism, fuss, pedantry, punctiliousness, fastidiousness [31].

Perfection as a noun implies flawlessness, maturity, being saintly, supreme excellence, accuracy [30]. Synonyms of perfection are choiceness, distinction, excellence, excellency, first-rateness, greatness, preeminence, superbness, superiority, supremacy. Perfectionist can be used as a noun and adjective, while perfectionistic — only as an adjective.

Perfectionment means improvement and refinement. Perfect as a verb means to bring to final form, improve, refine, complete, finalize, finish, polish, consummate.

Perfect as an adjective is similar in meaning to the noun ‘perfection’: being entirely without fault or defect, accurate, corresponding to an ideal standard; legally valid. The other meanings include proficient, pure, total, complete, sane, absolute, and mature. Obsolete meanings are certain, sure, contended, satisfied. Synonyms of perfect are absolute, faultless, flawless, ideal, immaculate, irreproachable, indefectible, letter-perfect, picture-book, picture-perfect, seamless, unblemished, entire, and intact. Antonyms of perfect are amiss, bad, censurable, defective, faulty, flawed, imperfect, and reproachable.

Consequently, along with perfectionism, the word family includes perfection, perfect (adjective and verb), perfectionment, perfectionist and perfectionistic. Perfectionism is the only word form that contains some negative implication in its meaning related to unattainability. The main component of the definition is doctrine which is defined as a set of religious, political, or legal beliefs [32].

The origin of the doctrine-related orientation derives from the suffix -ism which is also used as a noun, meaning practice, manner of action, behavior characteristic of a person, prejudice or discrimination; state, condition or property; a peculiar feature of something; a doctrine, theory, or adherence to a system or class of principles.

Considering the above mentioned, perfectionism is a semantic sum total of two components: perfection and ism — the former pointing at excellence, the latter — at a thinking mode. Together, they indicate to a set of beliefs of constant improvement, aspiration to excellence and attaining unrealistic goals. The locus of control can be internal, personal, or external, social.

Collocations in Academic Discourse

According to keyword search (Tb. 1), perfectionism is typical of adults (2008), including young adults, and adolescents (1007). Studies aimed at children (331), middle-aged (379) and aged people (172) are less numerous. Women are more vulnerable to perfectionism than men: 1741 female vs. 1369 male. Almost 200 papers on perfectionism are devoted to gender differences.

Two areas of human activity are prone to perfectionism: education (626) and sport (357). Students (483) are more likely to endure perfectionism than athletes (177).

Negative issues related to perfectionism begin with psychological problems (4273) distorting human mind, and result in a number of various consequences such as eating disorders (2791) which are referred to deviations in physical body state, personality self-identification issues (2742), and social consequences (955).

Perfectionism is thoroughly studied (5906): through questionnaires (950), controlled studies (856), clinical studies (833), rating scales (429), among others. A number of keywords associate perfectionism as a clinical state (1853); others offer some remedy for treating this disorder (1252), such as cognitive therapy, psychological adaptation, or psychotherapy.

Table 1/Таблица 1

**Lexical-semantic field of the concept ‘perfectionism’
in academic discourse /
Лексико-семантическое поле концепта «перфекционизм»
в научном дискурсе**

Categories	Keywords
Gender	female, 1741; male, 1369; sex difference, 108; gender, 90
Age	adult, 1501; young adult, 507; adolescent, 1007; middle aged, 379; child, 331; aged, 172; normal human, 101
Occupation	students, 483; university, 143; athlete, 177; sport, 105; exercise, 75
Personality	personality, 727; self-concept, 479; self-esteem, 307; self-report, 228; motivation, 200; personality inventory, 185; personality disorder, 281; personality test, 151; personality assessment, 92; self-evaluation, 92
Social Issues	behavior, 137; coping behavior, 117; achievement, 88; social behavior, 88; social phobia, 79; interpersonal relations, 78; avoidance behavior, 77; suicide, 77; culture, 74; responsibility, 72; maladjustment, 68
Psychology	depression, 735; obsessive-compulsive disorder, 571; obsession, 136; compulsion, 79; psychology, 550; anxiety, 514; psychological aspect, 324; stress, 193; mental stress, 133; anxiety disorder, 251; burnout, 121; affect, 110; distress syndrome, 91; impulsiveness, 86; fear, 84; neurosis, 79; emotions, 75; narcissism, 72; depressive disorder, 69
Eating Disorders	eating disorders, 912; feeding behavior, 154; feeding and eating disorders, 157; binge eating disorders, 121; anorexia nervosa, 300; bulimia, 278; bulimia nervosa, 109; body weight, 166; body mass, 166; body mass index, 87; body dissatisfaction, 87; obesity, 72; physiology, 103; pathophysiology, 79
Signs of Disease	risk factor, 447; risk assessment, 80; disease association, 195; mental disease, 182; treatment outcome, 156; disease severity, 147; prediction, 140; prevalence, 111; symptomatology, 92; symptom, 85; clinical feature, 81; comorbidity, 137
Overcoming	cognitive therapy, 156; psychotherapy, 119; cognitive behavioral therapy, 73; cognition, 247; psychological adaptation, 138; mental health, 123; attitude, 105; defense mechanism, 103; satisfaction, 96; thinking, 96; perception, 92
Methodological Studies	major clinical study, 833; controlled study, 777; case-control studies, 79; questionnaire, 826; cross-sectional study, 263; review, 186; psychometry, 185; reproducibility of results, 184; human experiment, 175; rating scale, 159; psychiatrists status rating scales, 155; psychological rating scale, 115; psychological models, 227; scoring system, 132; surveys and questionnaires, 124; comparative study, 121; regression analysis, 103; longitudinal study, 176; procedures, 88; correlation analysis, 86; clinical trial, 84; randomized control trial, 83; reliability, 81; diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 80; risk assessment, 80; psychologic assessment, 78; statistics, 75; factor analysis, 73; validity, 71; case report, 69; factorial analysis, 69; severity of illness index, 69

Source: compiled by the author

Let us consider the semantic categories from Table 1 more closely.

Gender. Both men and women are subjected to perfectionism, though studies are indicative of higher reliance of women on social opinion and, thus, following public rules more often and more persistently than men. The latter are less fearful of potential public ignorance or censure.

Age. A substantial social group vulnerable to perfectionism is comprised of adolescents. The cause of this phenomenon lies in the fact that they are considerably

influenced by adults and, especially, by such parents who are overcautious of their future, and are inclined to point at their children's mistakes rather than achievements. The current trend of adolescents living together with their parents longer worsens the adverse effect. Adults, exposed to perfectionism or perfectionistic influence, most probably bear heritage from their family traditions and beliefs.

Occupation. Perfectionism is widely spread in academic environment among students for several reasons: firstly, due to their intentions to receive higher education and prepare themselves in the most effective way for a high social position after graduation and receiving diploma; secondly, because of their negative past learning experience from childhood which left emotional fingerprints in their memories about their unsuccessful first steps, anxiety and inability to control their emotions when they were children. As they begin a new learning path, psychologically, they transfer their associations to a new stage of their development.

Perfectionism among athletes can be explained by objective reasons, such as severe competition, pressure from coach and parents, the desire to obtain the first prize, and by subjective reasons — fear of underperformance, self-criticism, and low self-esteem. In pursuit of eliminating any risk of misfortune or failure, athletes suffer from burnout, negative emotions, unproductive relations with surrounding people, overtraining and inclination to doping usage. Emotional well-being and mental health are highly valued not only for current professional sports career but also for future life.

Personality. Personal assessment is dependent on social norms and social standards. If physical, intellectual, or social characteristics do not correspond to the standards translated by public messages, self-evaluation drops significantly. Low self-concept is an integral feature of perfectionistic mindset instilled by parental influence. Personal disorders related to perfectionism include aggression, different forms of anger, hostile attitude to surrounding people, and shame.

Self-esteem at a high level produces elevated expectations from one's own activity and high personal standards; though fear of making mistakes rises proportionally, creating psychological obstacles to achieving high goals. Personal motivation determines the degree of satisfaction with reached goals: external motivation produces higher self-esteem than internal motivation does.

Social Issues. Social aspects of perfectionism matter when socially prescribed and other-oriented nature of the phenomenon is the cause of increased goal pursuit. Perfectionism instigates behavior in a working or other environments, implying goal-centered activity, which is characterized by strong commitment, high performance and a lot of undertaken efforts. Perfectionism models behavior determined by the necessity of achieving a meaningful result. Reaching a goal generates positive psychological thinking, positive emotions, a sense of importance of oneself to the public and society. A sense of achievement allows perfectionists to overcome low self-esteem and self-criticism, and provide evidence to oneself about their social value.

Negative manifestations of perfectionism such as social maladjustment, social phobia, avoidance behavior, poor interpersonal relations, and suicide, are caused

by high expectations from narrow and distant social environment, and personal expectations of social recognition of one's performance and achievements. Perfectionistic mindset poses a risk of suicidal behavior because of the fear of possible social reprimand or isolation.

Psychology. Psychological issues result from dysfunctional perfectionism and lead to various emotional disorders. Depression and anxiety as the main signs of perfectionism are explained by self-criticism, soaring personal standards, stringent frame-like thinking structures, and emotion suppression which are caused by a misconception in perfectionist mind about excessive emotional control which are considered to be redundant for rational thinking and achieving intended goals.

Patients with symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder suffer from repetitive ideas or reminiscences from the past which make them anxious. Compulsions are actions which are also psychologically painful but are believed to relieve patients from obsessions. Perfectionists with symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder are likely to convert their goals into obsessions which recur repetitively in their mind and urge them take actions to purpose those goals.

Stress is caused by perfectionism, burnout, and comorbid imposter-syndrome effect which develop as a result of performance exceeding normal standards, workaholism, or overtraining. Stress is aggravated by reserve perfectionist nature, unwilling to share emotions with others.

Narcissism originates from self-criticism, low self-confidence, and a feeling of inferiority which, at a social level, is expressed in self-important behavior. Narcissism is associated with workaholism, efforts of meeting high standards, and poor interpersonal relations.

Eating Disorders. Eating disorders occur with adolescents and, mainly, young adults as a result of their strong aspiration of achieving a high goal which occupies the entire possible amount of their time. Self-regulation mechanisms are focused on activities, necessary for completing tasks aimed at reaching a particular target; therefore, basic biological clocks and rhythms are not followed properly. Eating disorders of various kinds such as bulimia, obesity, or, on the contrary, anorexia, develop over a period of time. Consequently, eating disorders are caused by insufficient brain control of basic nutritional needs. Perfectionist mind is overwhelmed with goal achievement in such a way that it cannot process or deactivates essential functions.

Signs of Disease. Perfectionism is sometimes considered a mental disease which stems from psychological origin and manifests itself as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, accompanied by insomnia and headaches. Perfectionism is also associated with bulimic symptomatology and social anxiety disorder. Perfectionism is predicted to have high rates of comorbidity with psychological, nutritional, personal, and social disorders. Each of the above mentioned dysfunctions can trigger onset of diseases which do not have direct links to perfectionism. At the behavioral level, perfectionism can become a risk factor

and predictor of suicidality, especially, among young people who believe they do not match high social expectations and standards.

Overcoming. The main source of remedy for perfectionists is psychological help in the form of various forms of cognitive therapy, as they are too concerned over mistakes, hypothetical negative results, criticism, possible variants of action, and social expectations. As perfectionism is pathologically related to procrastination, overcoming techniques include therapies aimed at developing social openness, personal flexibility, and reducing levels of doubt and self-criticism. Beneficial effects of combating psychological disorders and dysfunctional beliefs have a positive influence on physical, mental conditions, and interpersonal relations.

Methodological Studies. Various studies of perfectionism are aimed at conceptualization of the phenomenon, building reliable and valid models, based on frequent symptomatology, which assist in identification and verification of perfectionism-related disorders at the psychological, physical, mental, personal, and social levels. Multidimensional scales and factor analysis are used to assess perfectionism in various population groups, such as adults, young adults, adolescents.

Observations, self-reports, case studies, and surveys are effective for registering behavior, health conditions of informants. Further analysis helps reveal typical behavior patterns and create models for cognitive therapies against maladaptive perfectionism. Targeted questionnaires, statistical, correlation, regression analyses and other mathematical methods are applied for objective quantification of data and drawing reliable rating scales of different forms and signs of perfectionism.

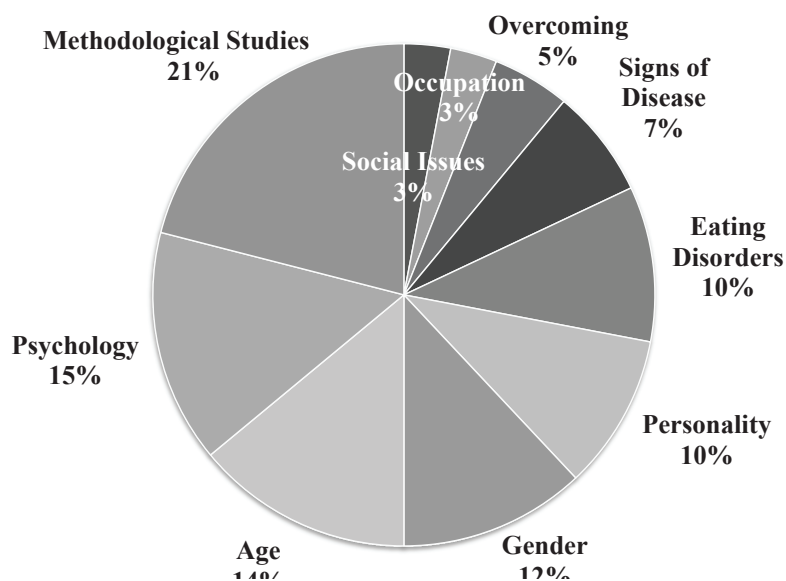


Fig. 1. A semantic field of the concept 'perfectionism' in academic discourse.

Source: compiled by the author

Рис. 1. Семантическое поле концепта «перфекционизм» в научном дискурсе

Источник: составлено автором

Overall, social characteristics (age, gender, occupation, social issues) constitute 32% of all lexical units, prevailing over psychological classes (psychology and personality), having a 25% share. The third group which can be referred to medicine accounts for 22%. The largest category is comprised of studies — 21% (Fig. 1).

Conclusion

Perfectionism has a multi-layer semantic field which implies complex relations between encoded and inferred meanings: on the one hand, perfectionism is posed as a positive character trait in a few social contexts, for example, in job interviews when candidates wish to produce a positive impression on a prospective employer — as a diligent worker, willing to reach high organizational goals; on the other hand, research papers on perfectionism give somewhat different evidence.

Perfectionism is viewed as a cognitive personality disorder due to a number of negative psychological inclinations such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, burnout, stress, neurosis, insomnia, depression, social anxiety, loneliness, and inadequate self-esteem. Perfectionism, presumably, has several sources: personal traits, parental influence, and social environment. Perfectionism is typical of academic and sports social groups which strive for constant personal improvement, the necessity to meet high standards, and strong competition with peers. Originally a cognitive attitude, perfectionism has a long-standing effect on development and socialization of a person.

Deep concerns over achieving a high goal, and anxiety about current or short-term underperformance have serious personal, mental, physical and social consequences, for example, eating disorders, resulting in excessive or insufficient body mass index, unhealthy interpersonal relations, social phobia, and generally, maladaptive behavior. Irrational sets of beliefs frequently serve as motivation for pursuing a certain behavioral pattern which is believed to result in reaching an idealistic unattainable goal.

Clinical studies of perfectionism are also carried out in order to reveal biological nature and systemic mental deviations related to the phenomenon. Obsessive-compulsive disorder seems to be a closely related pathology involving irrational attitudes and behavior, under the influence of strong and/or long-term stress. Treatment measures, mainly, include cognitive therapies which develop adaptive thinking strategies and create a defense mechanism against iterative recurrent relapses.

A cognitive approach to perfectionism treatment is based on numerous tests, controlled studies, questionnaires, surveys, case studies and observations which are aimed at constructing effective models against rigid psychological structures which dominate inadequate perception of reality.

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Сведения об авторе:

Филясова Юлия Анатольевна, кандидат филологических наук, доцент кафедры английской филологии и перевода Гуманитарного факультета СПбГЭУ; научные интересы: лингвистика, педагогика; e-mail: phill.yield@gmail.com
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9728-9458>; SPIN-код: 9503-8000

Information about the author:

Yulia A. Filyasova, Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor of the Department of English Philology and Translation, Humanitarian Faculty, SPbSUE. Research interests: linguistics, pedagogy; e-mail: phill.yield@gmail.com
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9728-9458>; SPIN-code: 9503-8000