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MANIFESTATIONS OF PERFECTIONISM, MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERFECTIONISM, AND SELF-ATTITUDE ACROSS DIFFERENT AGE PERIODS

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Abstract: Perfectionism is widely recognized as a multidimensional personality trait that shapes how individuals set standards for themselves, evaluate their own conduct, and relate to their own selfhood across the lifespan. The present study examined age-related variation in striving for perfection, multidimensional perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed), and self-attitude among a large adult sample. A total of 1,052 respondents divided into five age cohorts — early youth (n = 207), adolescence (n = 213), youth (n = 211), maturity (n = 209), and the second stage of maturity (n = 212) — completed the Striving for Perfection Test (W. Gaulter), the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett), and the Self-Attitude Questionnaire (Stolin & Panteleev). Kruskal-Wallis analyses revealed statistically significant age-related differences on nearly every scale, including striving for perfection ($H = 135.66$, $p < .001$), self-oriented perfectionism ($H = 47.05$, $p < .001$), and other-oriented perfectionism ($H = 70.44$, $p < .001$), whereas socially prescribed perfectionism did not differ significantly by age ($H = 2.48$, $p = .649$). Self-attitude components followed a broadly similar curvilinear pattern, rising from early youth through maturity before a modest decline in the second stage of maturity, with self-blame the only subscale that failed to reach significance. These findings suggest that perfectionistic strivings intensify across early and middle adulthood and interact closely with the developing structure of self-attitude, carrying implications for age-sensitive psychological support and counselling practice.

Keywords: perfectionism, multidimensional perfectionism, self-attitude, age differences, adulthood, self-esteem

1. Introduction

Perfectionism has moved from the margins of personality psychology to the center of contemporary research on well-being, achievement, and psychopathology. Far from a purely positive drive toward excellence, perfectionism is now understood as a complex, multidimensional construct that can simultaneously motivate accomplishment and undermine mental health. Hewitt and Flett's classic tripartite model distinguishes self-oriented perfectionism, in which individuals impose stringent standards on themselves; other-oriented perfectionism, in which individuals demand flawlessness from others; and socially prescribed perfectionism, in which individuals believe that others demand perfection of them. Each dimension carries a distinctive developmental trajectory and a distinctive relationship with psychological adjustment, which makes the question of how perfectionism changes across the lifespan both theoretically important and practically urgent.

Alongside perfectionism, self-attitude — the internal, evaluative relationship a person holds toward the self, encompassing self-confidence, self-acceptance, self-esteem, and the capacity to manage one's own behavior — forms a second axis along which developmental change can be traced. Cognitive-behavioral models of clinical perfectionism propose that self-worth becomes contingent on

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the relentless pursuit of unrealistically high standards, so that fluctuations in perceived performance translate directly into fluctuations in self-regard; if this is correct, the age periods in which perfectionistic striving is most pronounced should also be the periods in which self-attitude is most closely tied to achievement. Despite growing interest in the developmental unfolding of perfectionism, most empirical work has concentrated on adolescents and university students, leaving the trajectory across early, established, and later adulthood comparatively underexplored, particularly outside North American and Western European samples. The present study addresses this gap by comparing striving for perfection, the three dimensions of multidimensional perfectionism, and nine components of self-attitude across five sequential age cohorts drawn from a large, non-clinical sample.

Three research questions guided the study. First, does striving for perfection differ systematically across age periods spanning early youth to the second stage of maturity? Second, do self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism show the same or different developmental patterns? Third, how does self-attitude vary across the same age periods, and does this variation parallel the pattern observed for perfectionism? It was hypothesized that self- and other-oriented perfectionism, along with most components of self-attitude, would increase from early youth toward maturity and plateau or slightly decline thereafter, while socially prescribed perfectionism — being more dependent on perceived external pressure than on internally generated striving — would show a flatter age trajectory.

2. Literature Review

Contemporary research consistently supports the view that perfectionism is not a fixed trait but a dynamic disposition whose expression shifts across the lifespan and across cohorts. Curran and Hill's cross-temporal analyses of college students demonstrated that perceived parental expectations and criticism have risen markedly over recent decades, a trend linked to the broader escalation of perfectionistic strivings observed in successive generations of young people (Curran & Hill, 2022), implying that the psychological climate in which perfectionism develops differs across the eras in which people pass through early adulthood.

Age-related variation within a single cross-section has received more direct attention in recent work on perfectionism and self-compassion. Daniilidou (2023) examined adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism alongside multidimensional self-compassion in adults aged 18 to 65 and found that participants in established (30–45) and middle (46–65) adulthood reported more favorable self-compassion profiles than young adults, while emerging adults scored highest on both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. This pattern, in which perfectionistic striving is most pronounced in earlier adulthood and self-related resources strengthen with age, resonates closely with the hypotheses of the present study. Complementing this, Lee and colleagues (2021) followed more than a thousand community-dwelling adults across the lifespan and showed that self-compassion predicted better mental and physical well-being at every life stage, underscoring that the self-regulatory resources surrounding perfectionistic striving carry consequences well beyond young adulthood.

The interpersonal dimensions of perfectionism have also received systematic attention. Flett, Hewitt, Nepon, Sherry, and Smith's (2022) extensive review of socially prescribed perfectionism concluded that this dimension carries especially strong associations with depression, suicidality, and interpersonal dysfunction, and that its social origin — rooted in perceived external demands rather than internally generated standards — helps explain why it may respond differently to age than self-oriented striving. Maurage and colleagues (2022) extended this interpersonal framing into a clinical

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population, reporting that adults with severe alcohol use disorder displayed elevated self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism relative to controls.

Turning to self-attitude and self-esteem specifically, Khossousi and colleagues' (2024) systematic review and meta-analysis of 83 studies confirmed a robust negative association between perfectionistic concerns and self-esteem, alongside a negligible positive association between perfectionistic strivings and self-esteem, providing indirect support for cognitive-behavioral models in which self-worth becomes excessively contingent on meeting demanding standards. In a related vein, Miegel, Moritz, Wagener, Cludius, and Jelinek (2020) demonstrated that self-esteem statistically mediates the relationship between perfectionism and obsessive-compulsive symptoms, reinforcing the idea that self-attitude functions as a psychological pathway linking perfectionistic cognition to broader adjustment outcomes.

The developmental trajectory of self-esteem itself has been mapped with increasing precision in recent longitudinal research, offering a useful benchmark against which the present cross-sectional age comparisons can be interpreted. Reitz's (2022) integrative review of self-esteem development and life events concluded that self-esteem typically follows an inverted U-shaped pattern across the lifespan, increasing from late adolescence through adulthood, peaking in middle adulthood, and declining only in late life — a pattern strikingly similar to the one hypothesized here for perfectionistic striving and self-attitude. Filosa, Alessandri, Robins, and Pastorelli (2022), following Italian adolescents into young adulthood across fourteen years, likewise found that self-esteem rose steadily through the transition into work and adult responsibility, with individual differences in this trajectory linked to life-course transitions such as employment and partnership. Benedetto, Macidonio, and Ingrassia (2024) extended this picture specifically to perfectionism, showing that self-compassion mediates the relationship between maladaptive perfectionism (discrepancy) and lower psychological well-being among emerging adults, while adaptive perfectionism showed no such association — reinforcing the distinction between healthy and unhealthy perfectionistic profiles that recurs throughout this literature. Finally, Monteagudo, De Maria, Roldan, Cordellat-Marzal, Pinazo-Hernandis, and Blasco-Lafarga (2025) extended the perfectionism–distress relationship into later life, finding that both perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns predicted poorer objective physical fitness among older adults via elevated depression and anxiety, underscoring that the psychological and even physical costs of perfectionism persist well beyond young adulthood.

Developmental and demographic moderators of perfectionism have also been documented among younger cohorts. Sand, Bøe, Shafran, Stormark, and Hysing (2021), in a large Norwegian adolescent sample, found only modest gender differences and no significant differences in perfectionism across adolescent age bands, suggesting that some forms of perfectionism stabilize relatively early, whereas the psychological correlates of perfectionism appear to continue evolving well into later adulthood. Kawamoto, Sheth, Yang, Demps, and Sevig (2023) showed that self-compassion functions differently for adaptive versus maladaptive perfectionists among university students, while Woodfin, Molde, Dundas, and Binder (2021) demonstrated in a randomized controlled trial that brief self-compassion interventions reduce the negative sequelae of perfectionism, including anxiety, depression, and body image concerns; and Hummel and colleagues' (2022) experimental work indicates a causal pathway running from perfectionistic cognition to negative affect, supporting the view that the self-evaluative consequences of perfectionism are causally consequential rather than merely correlational.

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Taken together, this literature suggests that (a) perfectionism and self-attitude are theoretically and empirically intertwined, (b) different dimensions of perfectionism may follow different developmental trajectories, and (c) age-related shifts in self-compassion and self-esteem may buffer or exacerbate the psychological costs of perfectionistic striving. However, few studies have directly compared striving for perfection, multidimensional perfectionism, and multi-component self-attitude within a single, large, age-stratified sample — a gap the present study is designed to address.

3. Methodology

Participants. The sample comprised 1,052 adult respondents, stratified into five sequential age cohorts corresponding to recognized developmental periods: early youth (n = 207), adolescence/early emerging adulthood (n = 213), youth (n = 211), maturity (n = 209), and the second stage of maturity (n = 212). Participants were recruited through educational and community settings and took part on a voluntary, anonymous basis.

Instruments. Three standardized instruments were administered: the Striving for Perfection Test (W. Gaulter), assessing a global disposition toward perfectionistic striving; the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett), measuring self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism; and the Self-Attitude Questionnaire (Stolin & Panteleev), yielding scores on nine components of self-relation — sincerity, self-confidence, self-management, global self-attitude, self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-loyalty, internal conflict, and self-blame.

Procedure and data analysis. All three instruments were administered in a single session under standardized instructions. Because the resulting scale scores did not meet the assumptions required for parametric comparison across five independent groups, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to evaluate differences among the five age cohorts on every scale. Mean rank scores are reported for each cohort, alongside the H statistic and the associated significance level, with $p < .01$ treated as the threshold for statistical significance throughout.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the mean rank comparison of striving for perfection across the five age cohorts. A statistically significant difference emerged, $H(4) = 135.66$, $p < .001$, with mean ranks increasing from early youth through maturity and then decreasing somewhat in the second stage of maturity, indicating that striving for perfection intensifies across early and middle adulthood before easing in later maturity.

Table 1. Differences in Striving for Perfection Test scores by age period (Kruskal-Wallis test, n = 1,052)

Scale	Early Youth (n=207)	Adolescence (n=213)	Youth (n=211)	Maturity (n=209)	2nd Maturity (n=212)	H	p
Striving for perfection	430.66	446.51	578.09	665.82	511.36	135.66	<.001**

*Note: ** p < .01; n.s. = not statistically significant.*

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Table 2 reports the nine self-attitude components measured by the Stolin and Panteleev questionnaire. With the sole exception of self-blame, every component differed significantly across the five age cohorts, generally rising from early youth through maturity before declining slightly in the second stage of maturity — a pattern that closely mirrors the trajectory observed for striving for perfection.

Table 2. Differences in Self-Attitude Questionnaire scores by age period (Kruskal-Wallis test, n = 1,052)

Scale	Early Youth (n=207)	Adolescence (n=213)	Youth (n=211)	Maturity (n=209)	2nd Maturity (n=212)	H	p
Sincerity	488.34	480.67	566.42	579.34	516.18	23.32	<.001**
Self-confidence	478.53	468.31	511.53	595.68	508.47	37.56	<.001**
Self-management	489.25	482.15	564.78	528.93	517.44	22.53	<.001**
Self-attitude (global)	476.92	466.98	584.24	596.55	507.41	38.71	<.001**
Self-esteem	486.65	478.44	571.89	582.71	512.81	24.91	<.001**
Self-acceptance	492.77	485.30	560.93	575.68	517.93	19.14	<.001**
Self-loyalty	475.16	465.41	585.77	599.26	507.07	40.86	<.001**
Internal conflict	483.82	574.16	563.58	488.74	512.15	27.10	<.001**
Self-blame	500.76	496.18	559.35	507.74	528.56	9.36	.053 (n.s.)

*Note: ** $p < .01$; n.s. = not statistically significant.*

Table 3 presents the three dimensions of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. Self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism differed significantly across age cohorts, whereas socially prescribed perfectionism did not, indicating that internally generated forms of perfectionism follow a clearer developmental trajectory than perfectionism attributed to external social pressure.

Table 3. Differences in Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale scores by age period (Kruskal-Wallis test, n = 1,052)

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Scale	Early Youth (n=207)	Adolescence (n=213)	Youth (n=211)	Maturity (n=209)	2nd Maturity (n=212)	H	p
Self-oriented perfectionism	471.34	460.81	602.91	589.42	508.83	47.05	<.001**
Other-oriented perfectionism	451.25	438.68	601.37	632.54	509.89	70.44	<.001**
Socially prescribed perfectionism	520.64	514.92	534.47	530.68	532.17	2.48	.649 (n.s.)

*Note: ** $p < .01$; n.s. = not statistically significant.*

5. Conclusion

The present study set out to examine how striving for perfection, the three dimensions of multidimensional perfectionism, and nine components of self-attitude vary across five sequential age periods in a large adult sample. The results provide clear evidence that perfectionism is not a static disposition: striving for perfection, self-oriented perfectionism, and other-oriented perfectionism all increased substantially from early youth through the periods of youth and maturity, before easing somewhat in the second stage of maturity. This pattern is consistent with theoretical accounts suggesting that internally generated perfectionistic standards intensify as individuals move through the demands of career establishment, family formation, and social responsibility that characterize early and middle adulthood, and that these pressures may moderate as individuals enter later maturity with a more consolidated sense of identity.

In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism — the belief that others demand perfection of oneself — showed no significant variation across age, echoing Flett and colleagues' (2022) observation that this dimension is driven primarily by perceived external pressure rather than by internally shifting developmental priorities. This dissociation underscores the theoretical value of treating multidimensional perfectionism as a set of related but distinguishable constructs rather than a single unitary trait.

The self-attitude findings reinforce this developmental picture. With the single exception of self-blame, every component of self-attitude — including self-confidence, self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-loyalty — rose across the same age span in which perfectionistic striving intensified, before declining modestly in the second stage of maturity. This co-occurrence supports the cognitive-behavioral proposition that self-regard becomes closely bound to the pursuit of demanding personal standards during the socially active years of adulthood, and aligns with Khossousi and colleagues' (2024) meta-analytic finding that perfectionistic concerns are reliably associated with lower self-esteem, as well as with Daniilidou's (2023) demonstration that self-compassion resources strengthen with age even as perfectionism itself fluctuates. Practically, interventions such as brief self-compassion training, shown by Woodfin and colleagues (2021) to reduce the negative sequelae of perfectionism, may be especially valuable during the youth and maturity periods identified here as peaks of perfectionistic striving.

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Future longitudinal research is needed to determine whether the age differences observed cross-sectionally in this study reflect genuine within-person developmental change or cohort-specific historical influences of the kind documented by Curran and Hill (2022), and to examine how cultural context — including the Central Asian setting of the present sample — shapes the trajectory of perfectionism and self-attitude across the adult lifespan.

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