

Relationship Between Perfectionism and Depression Among Asasipintar Students  
(*Hubungan di antara kesempurnaan dan kemurungan di kalangan pelajar ASASIpintar*)

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ABSTRACT

For pre-university students, good academic results are vital in the pursuit of tertiary education. Often, the process of attaining academic excellence has made high-expectancy students aim for better results compared to their peers. As not all high-expectancy students manage to get their expectations, the failure may lead them to depression. This study investigated the intensity of perfectionism and the level of depression among a group of pre-university students and the relationship between the two variables. A total of 180 ASASIpintar students of session 2017/2018 at GENIUS@Pintar National Gifted Centre, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia had participated in this study. The findings demonstrated that the intensity of perfectionism and level of depression in ASASIpintar students was moderate. Both variables were strongly positive correlated while the perfectionism dimension that was found to play the most significant role in causing depression was socially prescribed perfectionism. Other than that, ASASIpintar students had high level of self-oriented perfectionism. In conclusion, ASASIpintar students had moderate level of depression and it was strongly related to the tendency of the students to believe that others expected perfection from them. Hence, ASASIpintar students should practice perfectionism coping strategies to avoid depression.

Keywords: Perfectionism; depression; pre-university students

ABSTRAK

*Bagi pelajar pra universiti, keputusan akademik yang baik adalah penting dalam mengejar pendidikan tertiar. Biasanya, proses memperoleh kejayaan dalam akademik menyebabkan pelajar jangkaan-tinggi menasaskan keputusan yang lebih baik berbanding rakan sebaya. Oleh sebab tidak semua pelajar jangkaan-tinggi mencapai apa yang diharapkan, kegagalan tersebut boleh membawa mereka kepada kemurungan. Kajian ini menyelidiki keamatan kesempurnaan dan tahap kemurungan di kalangan sekumpulan pelajar pra-universiti dan hubungan di antara kedua-dua pemboleh ubah. Sejumlah 180 pelajar ASASIpintar sesi 2017/2018 di Pusat GENIUS@Pintar Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia telah mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa keamatan kesempurnaan dan tahap kemurungan pelajar ASASIpintar adalah sederhana. Kedua-dua pemboleh ubah mempunyai korelasi yang positif dan kuat manakala dimensi kesempurnaan yang memainkan peranan penting dalam menyebabkan kemurungan ialah kesempurnaan sosial. Selain itu, pelajar ASASIpintar mempunyai tahap kesempurnaan sendiri yang tinggi. Kesimpulannya, pelajar ASASIpintar mempunyai tahap kemurungan yang sederhana dan ia sangat berkaitan dengan kecenderungan pelajar untuk mempercayai bahawa manusia mengharapkan kesempurnaan daripada mereka. Oleh yang demikian, pelajar ASASIpintar hendaklah mengamalkan strategi mengatasi kesempurnaan untuk mengelakkan kemurungan.*

*Kata kunci: Kesempurnaan; kemurungan; pelajar pra-universiti*

## INTRODUCTION

Perfectionism is the trait of striving for flawlessness and setting high performance standards, accompanied by critical-self evaluations and concerns regarding others' evaluations. According to Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan and Mikail (1991), perfectionism can be categorized into three dimensions: self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism is the unrealistic standards and perfectionistic motivation one creates for himself/herself while other-oriented perfectionism is the unrealistic standards and perfectionistic motivations for others. Socially prescribed perfectionism is one's belief that his/her spouse expects him/her to be perfect in every aspect. Rice, Ashby and Slaney (1998) have divided perfectionism into two types: adaptive perfectionism and maladaptive perfectionism. A person with adaptive perfectionism has high but adjustable personal standards according to situations and resources, a need for order and organization, and an unwillingness to procrastinate. Meanwhile, a person with maladaptive perfectionism experiences excessive concern about making mistakes, doubt his/her actions, and tend to procrastinate, feel tense and anxious, and reported to have highly critical parents who had unrealistic expectations for their children.

Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. It can negatively affect how one feel, think and act. A person suffering from depression may have trouble doing day-to-day normal activities, and at a critical stage, may even have suicidal thoughts and eventually attempt to commit suicide. Depression is the most common mental disorder and has become a leading cause of morbidity over the past decades. It is projected that depression, will be among the major causes of worldwide disability by the year 2020 and the highest disorder in high income countries (World Health Organization et al., 2008).

It is generally accepted that perfectionism, especially maladaptive perfectionism and socially-prescribed perfectionism is indeed correlated with depression (Enns and Coxx, 2002; Flett, Besser, & Hewitt, 2014; Sassaroli et al., 2008; Hewitt et al., 2000). Enns and Coxx (2002) compared maladaptive perfectionism with adaptive perfectionism and found that maladaptive perfectionism was more correlated with depression than adaptive perfectionism. In the study done by Flett, Besser, & Hewitt (2014), socially prescribed perfectionism was found to have the strongest association to depression, compared to other categories in the dimension of perfectionism while

patients who were diagnosed with depression showed a higher level self-oriented perfectionism (Sassaroli et al., 2008).

As perfectionism is generally viewed as a positive trait that is usually related to high academic achievements and levels of motivation, it is prevalent among college students, for whom academic performance is crucial to one's personal development (Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007). In Malaysia, students enrolled in the pre-university programs are expected to strive in order to fulfil Bachelor's degree requirements. ASASIpintar program is one of the pre-university programs in Malaysia where students who are enrolled in the ASASIpintar program are generally high academic achievers. In order to gain placements in their preferred faculties in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, students have to strive to fulfil faculties' CGPA requirements.

Parents' expectations as well as personal desires have made ASASIpintar students' expectations of themselves grow. This situation becomes worse if the students also set their own standards and compare their achievements with their peers. As a result, ASASIpintar students who cannot cope with high expectations might have a high risk of depression.

The purpose of this study is to identify the intensity of perfectionism and level of depression among ASASIpintar students. The research questions and objectives are as follows

### Research Questions

- i. What is the intensity of perfectionism among ASASIpintar students?
- ii. What is the level of depression among ASASIpintar students ?
- iii. Is there a correlation between the intensity of perfectionism and an individual's level of depression?

### Research Objectives

- i. To determine the intensity of perfectionism among ASASIpintar students
- ii. To determine the level of depression among ASASIpintar students.
- iii. To determine the relationship between the intensity of perfectionism and an individual's level of depression.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative research where the data were gathered using self-administered questionnaires. A total of 180 participants aged 18-19 making up the entire population of ASASIpintar students, were involved in this research. The students were undergoing the ASASIpintar program in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for academic session 2017/2018. Two sets of questionnaires were being used in this research. The first was the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1990). This 45-item scale measured levels of perfectionism which are categorized into three dimensions: self-oriented perfectionism, other oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism. Subjects were required to use a 7-point scale to rate to the extent to which they agree to the given statements concerning personal characteristics and traits related to perfectionism. The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) had exhibited high reliability and validity (Enns, Cox, Sareen & Freeman 2002; Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan & Mikail, 1991). The second questionnaire was the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The Depression,

Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS) was a 42-item self-report instrument that was designed to measure the three related negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress. Each of the categories contained 14 items. The depression scale in DASS assessed depressive symptoms which include dysphoria, hopelessness, devaluation of life, self-deprecation, lack of interest or involvement, anhedonia and inertia. Respondents will be asked to use a 4-point severity scale to rate to the extent to which they have experienced each state over the past week. The DASS has displayed high internal consistency, reliability and validity (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

This research was conducted in December 2017. The data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software based on research objectives.

In order to answer the first research objective, the population mean of the scores from the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale was calculated. The intensity of perfectionism was then being categorized based on the range of scores as indicated in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Intensity of perfectionisms based on scores

Range of Scores	Intensity of Perfectionism
1.00 – 2.99	Weak
3.00 – 4.99	Moderate
5.00 – 6.99	Strong

In order to answer the second research objective, the population mean of the scores from the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale was being

computed. The level of depression was identified using Table 2.

TABLE 2. Level of depression based on scores

Range of Scores	Level of Depression
0.00– 0.60	Normal
0.61 – 1.20	Mild
1.21 – 1.80	Moderate
1.81 – 2.40	Severe
2.41 – 3.00	Extremely severe

Finally, for answering the third research objective, the Pearson correlation coefficient,  $r$  was calculated using SPSS software, for two variables: 1) Perfectionism, 2) Depression. The value  $r$  was

interpreted using Table 3 to indicate the relationship between the intensity of perfectionism and level of depression.

TABLE 3. Interpretation of Pearson correlation coefficient value,  $r$

Value of $r$	Interpretation
1	Perfectly positive linear correlation
0.90 – 0.99	Very strong positive linear correlation
0.70 – 0.89	Strong positive linear correlation
0.50 – 0.69	Moderate positive linear correlation
0.30 – 0.49	Weak positive linear correlation
0.01 – 0.29	Very weak linear positive correlation
0	No linear correlation
-0.01 – -0.29	Very weak negative linear correlation
-0.30 – -0.49	Weak negative linear correlation
-0.50 – -0.69	Moderate negative linear correlation
-0.70 – -0.89	Strong negative linear correlation
-0.90 – -0.99	Negative linear correlation
-1	Perfectly negative linear correlation

## RESULTS

A total of 180 students from the ASASIpintar programme in Pusat PERMATApintar Negara, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia participated in this

study. Table 4 shows the intensity of perfectionism in these students, as measured by the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. Perfectionism as a whole was moderate. Other than that, students had a strong self-oriented perfectionism.

TABLE 4. Intensity of perfectionism among ASASIpintar students

	Mean	Category
Self-oriented perfectionism	5.0219	Strong
Other-oriented perfectionism	4.2322	Moderate
Socially prescribed perfectionism	4.6511	Moderate
Perfectionism (overall)	4.6351	Moderate

Table 5 indicates that the level of depression among ASASIpintar students was moderate for each

component in the questionnaire. Thus, the level of depression as a whole was moderate.

TABLE 5. Level of depression among ASASIpintar students

	Mean	Level
Depression	1.2563	Moderate
Anxiety	1.3016	Moderate
Stress	1.5393	Moderate
Depression (overall)	1.3717	Moderate

Results in Table 6 reveals that perfectionism variables possessed a strong positive linear correlation on the whole was correlated with depression as both ( $r = 0.737, p < 0.01$ ).

TABLE 6. Pearson correlation value between perfectionism (overall) and depression (overall)

		Perfectionism	Depression
Perfectionism	Pearson correlation	1	0.737**
	Significance (2-tailed)		
	N	180	180
Depression	Pearson correlation	0.737**	1
	Significance (2-tailed)		
	N	180	180

Results in Table 6 reveals that perfectionism depression ( $r = 0.575, p < 0.01$ ) and other- oriented perfectionism and depression ( $r = 0.584, p < 0.01$ ) had on the whole was correlated with depression as both a moderate positive linear correlation, as recorded in variables possessed a strong positive linear correlation a moderate positive linear correlation, as recorded in ( $r = 0.737, p < 0.01$ ). Table 7 and Table 8.

Both self-oriented perfectionism and

TABLE 7. Pearson correlation value between self-oriented perfectionism and depression

		Self-oriented Perfectionism	Depression
Self-oriented Perfectionism	Pearson correlation	1	0.575**
	Significance (2-tailed)		
	N	180	180
Depression	Pearson correlation	0.575**	1
	Significance (2-tailed)		
	N	180	180

TABLE 8. Pearson correlation value between other-oriented perfectionism and depression

		Other-oriented Perfectionism	Depression
Other-oriented Perfectionism	Pearson correlation	1	0.584**
	Significance (2-tailed)		
	N	180	180
Depression	Pearson correlation	0.584**	1
	Significance (2-tailed)		
	N	180	180

On the other hand, Table 9 displays a strong positive linear correlation between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression ( $r = 0.792, p < 0.01$ ).

TABLE 9. Pearson correlation value between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression

		Socially Prescribed Perfectionism	Depression
Socially Prescribed Perfectionism	Pearson correlation	1	0.792**
	Significance (2-tailed)		
	N	180	180
Mean Depression	Pearson correlation	0.792**	1
	Significance (2-tailed)		
	N	180	180

## DISCUSSION

### Intensity of Perfectionism

Findings from this study have revealed that ASASIpintar students' intensity of perfectionism is at the moderate level. Interestingly, in her study, Tengku Elmi Azlina (2017) found the perfectionism intensity in gifted and talented learners to be at a high level; for both the overall perfectionism and for perfectionism according to dimensions.

Neumeister, Williams and Cross (2009) and Neumeister (2004) have described in their studies that factors contributing to the development of self-oriented perfectionism in gifted college students include mastery of early academic experiences without effort and no previous experiences with academic

failure. Having little effort in mastering academic experiences in addition to no previous encounters with academic failure, gifted learners will expect themselves to continue to excel in their academics as they grow older. This results in them wanting to be the best in their academic field which requires them to produce "perfect" work, according to their standards. Hence, resulting in the same intensity of self-oriented perfectionism they possessed when they were younger. ASASIpintar students were excellent students at their old schools with different backgrounds. Some of them were categorized as gifted and talented while the rest were non-gifted. However, as they were high achievers, undoubtedly most of them had no previous experience with academic failure. Thus, the students had high self-oriented perfectionism.

In the similar study by Neumeister (2004), the development of socially prescribed perfectionism is found to be influenced by exposure to parental perfectionism and an authoritarian parenting style that leads to the perception of stringent expectations, achievement-tied sense of self-worth, and a fear of disappointing others. As all ASASIpintar students stayed in residential college, they have less time with their parents. Students may feel their burdens to be eased even in the slightest way as they no longer need to face their parents on a day-to-day basis. They feel more relaxed and less pressured to conform to their parents' expectations. However, being with peers who were about the same academic level made ASASIpintar students compare their achievement with the others. Fear of poor achievement and the need to be acceptable by peers, had made the students feel that they have to be perfect to people's eye. It is of educators' concern that the intensity of perfectionism might grow during their study in degree level.

#### Level of Depression

Findings from this study have portrayed that ASASIpintar students experience a moderate level of depression as a whole. Garguilo (2006) and Sousa (2003) stated that gifted and talented learners tend to have interpersonal issues with their peer groups. They are generally more intellectual and academically able when compared to their average counterparts. It will be natural for non-gifted students to distance themselves from their more gifted counterparts as they will not be able to easily share nor understand some of their perspectives, leading to a strained social interaction. The feeling of being marginalized by the broader peer population will inevitably lead the gifted learners to sense of isolation. On some occasions, it is observed that gifted and talented learners tend to use humor either on themselves or on complex situations to make things more tolerable, diffuse strained situations and to be more acceptable by their peers.

It is also worth mentioning that among the three components of depression, stress scored the highest mean, indicating that ASASIpintar students experience a higher level of stress as compared to depression and anxiety. Chan (2003) and Kaufman (1992) have explained that gifted learners experience a different kind of stress, such as the unrealistic expectations of their parents. Parents place high hopes on their child when the child is identified as gifted and talented. Aside from parents, environment may contribute to stress. Being far from home, living in a residential college with more flexible rules as compared to their old schools as well

as the academic load had made ASASIpintar students struggle to adjust with the new environment.

As stress plays a role in depression, it is important that ASASIpintar students manage their stress effectively in order to avoid from plunging into depression. It has been proved that greater stress management self-efficacy is associated with lower depression scores (Sawatzky, et al. 2012). Therefore, students with limited stress management self-efficacy needs to be identified and provided with appropriate supportive services that may help them to manage stress and subsequently prevent depression.

#### Correlation between Perfectionism and Depression

It is crucial to note among the three dimensions of perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism had demonstrated the highest positive correlation with depression ( $r = 0.792, p < 0.01$ ), a strong positive linear correlation. Past research has found similarly that socially prescribed perfectionism relative to self-oriented perfectionism and other-oriented perfectionism, have more consistent positive associations with depressive symptoms (Rice, Ashby & Slaney, 1998; Hewitt & Flett, 1990). This is not surprising in a sense that people should be quite prone to depressive symptoms if they perceive they are chronically low in acceptance as a result of having to live up to impossible expectations coming from their lives and society in general.

ASASIpintar students may have a limited social support, as a result from the interpersonal issues with their peer groups. When the personally set standards of expectations failed to be achieved, some of them may feel an intensified disappointment and fear of losing their already limited social support. This will lead to depression.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has examined the intensity of perfectionism, level of depression and the correlation between perfectionism and depression among ASASIpintar students. The result of this study has shown that the intensity of perfectionism and level of depression in the population is moderate. Both variables were strongly positive correlated and the dimension that is found to play the most significant role in causing depression was socially prescribed perfectionism. Thus, ASASIpintar students should learn and practice perfectionism coping strategies in order to reduce perfectionism intensity and hence be able to avoid depression.

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