

Reflective and ruminative types of self-consciousness among young adults with perfectionistic personality traits

Refleksyjna i ruminacyjna forma samoświadomości wśród młodych dorosłych z perfekcjonistycznym rysem osobowości

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Abstract

Introduction and objective: Motives for self-observation can be diverse. This study aims to determine whether young adults with perfectionistic personality traits are closer to the ruminative or reflective type of private self-consciousness. **Materials and methods:** The study involved 183 healthy individuals aged 18–30 years ($M = 20.87$, $SD = 3.24$), with women accounting for 57%. The Big Three Perfectionism Scale (BTPS) by Smith and the Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire (RRQ) by Trapnell and Campbell were used. **Results:** The results indicate that perfectionism is positively related to the ruminative type of self-consciousness. Reflexivity, as cognitive curiosity about oneself, represents a more mature way of functioning for which perfectionism is unnecessary. In contrast, perfectionism is strongly associated with critical self-examination and has much in common with the ruminative form of self-consciousness. Self-critical perfectionism thus becomes a strategy whereby increased rumination, i.e. ruminating about past and potential failures, leads individuals to believe they are preventing future failures. Conversely, grandiose perfectionism protects against rumination. Individuals do not perceive their mistakes and, therefore, do not ruminate about them. **Conclusions:** Based on the Three Big Perfectionism Scale, the results confirm the association of the ruminative type of private self-consciousness with perfectionism and its absence between the reflective type and perfectionism.

Keywords: rumination, reflection, perfectionism, self-consciousness

Streszczenie

Wprowadzenie i cel: Motywów koncentracji na własnych procesach psychicznych jest wiele. W niniejszym badaniu autorzy starają się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy młodzi dorośli z perfekcjonistycznym rysem osobowości są bliżsi ruminacyjnemu czy refleksyjnemu typowi samoświadomości prywatnej. **Materiał i metody:** W badaniu wzięło udział 183 zdrowych osób w wieku 18–30 lat ($M = 20,87$, $SD = 3,24$), z czego 57% stanowiły kobiety. Zastosowano The Big Three Perfectionism Scale Martina M. Smitha oraz Kwestionariusz Ruminacji-Refleksji Paula D. Trapnella i Jennifer D. Campbell w polskiej adaptacji Aleksandry Słowińskiej i wsp. (2014). **Wyniki:** Wyniki wskazują, że perfekcjonizm jest pozytywnie związany z ruminacyjnym typem samoświadomości prywatnej. Refleksyjność, jako poznawcza ciekawość samego siebie, reprezentuje bardziej dojrzały sposób funkcjonowania, dla którego perfekcjonizm nie jest potrzebny. Z kolei perfekcjonizm jest silnie związany z krytyczną samooceną i ma wiele wspólnego z ruminacyjną formą samoświadomości. Samokrytyczny perfekcjonizm staje się zatem strategią, która poprzez zwiększenie ruminacji, tj. myślenia o przeszłych i możliwych niepowodzeniach, w opinii osoby chroni ją przed popełnianiem kolejnych niepowodzeń. Z kolei perfekcjonizm wielkościowy chroni przed ruminacjami. Ludzie nie dostrzegają swoich błędów i dlatego nie ruminują o nich. **Wnioski:** W oparciu o The Three Big Perfectionism Scale wyniki potwierdzają związek ruminacyjnego typu samoświadomości prywatnej z perfekcjonizmem i jego brak między typem refleksyjnym a perfekcjonizmem.

Słowa kluczowe: ruminacja, refleksja, perfekcjonizm, samoświadomość

INTRODUCTION

Focusing attention on oneself and the psychological processes involved have been the subject of extensive research (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Scheier and Carver, 1983). The terms used to describe this phenomenon include self-awareness, self-attentiveness, self-attention, and self-reflection.

Self-consciousness contributes to building self-knowledge (Hall, 1992), promotes the attainment of psychological well-being (Trudeau and Reich, 1995), and serves as a significant factor in determining psychological maturity (Trapnell and Campbell, 1999). The private and public aspects of self-consciousness have traditionally been measured and studied since the 1970s (Fenigstein et al., 1975).

Trapnell and Campbell's (1999) concept of ruminative and reflective forms of private self-consciousness aimed to expand upon Fenigstein's ideas about the motives behind self-observation. The motivations for developing consciousness can stem from both neurotic anxiety and cognitive curiosity about oneself.

Martin M. Smith's three-dimensional concept of perfectionism (Smith et al., 2016) is a new proposal for understanding this construct. The authors propose three global higher-order factors: rigid perfectionism, self-critical perfectionism, and narcissistic perfectionism, which consist of 10 more basic aspects. The literature on perfectionists often refers to a ruminative style of responding to mistakes and imperfections (Frost et al., 1997). However, there is a paucity of research describing the relationship between the Big Three Perfectionism Scale (BTPS) factors and types of private self-consciousness. Considering the results of previous analyses, it can be concluded that ruminations are significantly correlated with perfectionism (Flett et al., 2002) and represent a coping style of individuals with high perfectionism trait (Burns and Fedewa, 2005). Socially prescribed perfectionism correlates with ruminations in the cognitive regulation of emotions (Rudolph et al., 2007). Ruminations mediate the relationship between perfectionism and psychological distress: depression and hopelessness (O'Connor et al., 2007). According to Smith's analysis (Smith et al., 2016), constructs similar to rigid and critical perfectionism are associated with symptoms of depression and a ruminative thinking style. This raises the question: what is the relationship between the ruminative style of self-consciousness and rigid, critical, and narcissistic perfectionism?

There is no knowledge about the relationship between the reflective style of self-consciousness and the BTPS. It is possible that perfectionism in reflective individuals is associated with an inability to inhibit the pursuit of self-knowledge, expressed, for example, in taking up new forms of self-improvement. This raises another question: what is the relationship between a reflective style of self-awareness and rigid, critical, and narcissistic perfectionism?

Previous research leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: Perfectionism, especially self-critical perfectionism, positively predicts the intensity of personal ruminations.

Concern over mistakes is particularly important in explaining the severity of ruminations.

H2: The analysed dimensions of perfectionism are negatively related to the intensity of personal reflection.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants were young adults recruited through a social media advertisement (Facebook) using the snowball sampling method. The survey was conducted via an online questionnaire, a link to which was included in the advertisement. The inclusion criterion for the study was the participant's age defined after Reifman as emerging adulthood, i.e. between 18 and 30 years old (Reifman, 2022). After rejecting the questionnaires which were incomplete or left doubts as to their reliability, 183 respondents (out of 187 total), aged 18–30 years ($M = 20.87$; $SD = 3.24$) including 56.8% of women, were accepted for further analysis. The sociodemographic characteristics of the study group are presented in Tab. 1. All the participants consented to participate in the study and received no compensation for completing the survey. No approval was sought from the Ethics Committee for the study, as it was not required. The survey was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the accepted standards of research in psychology. Two questionnaires were used in the study:

1. Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire (RRQ) (Trapnell and Campbell, 1999) in its Polish adaptation (Słowińska et al., 2014) was used to assess two types of private self-consciousness. The scale consists of 24 statements forming two subscales: Ruminations (12 items) and Reflections (12 items). The individual items in the questionnaire relate to anxiety-motivated involuntary concentration on one's own experiences (Ruminations subscale) and curiosity-motivated

		N	%
Education	Primary	65	35.5
	High school	88	48.1
	Higher	30	16.4
Professional status	I learn	69	37.7
	I study	64	35.0
	I work	11	6.0
	I work and learn	11	6.0
Place of residence	I work and study	28	15.3
	Village	44	24.0
	City with up to 50 thousand residents	46	25.1
	City of 51 to 100 thousand residents	31	16.9
	City with 101 to 250 thousand residents	36	19.7
Marital status	City with more than 250 thousand residents	26	14.2
	Single	120	65.6
	In a relationship for a short time	16	8.7
	In a relationship for a long time	47	25.7
% – percentage of the total sample.			

Tab. 1. Sociodemographic characteristics

Variable	Min-max	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
SOP	5-25	16.21	3.96	-0.07	-0.39	0.77
SWC	5-24	13.53	4.66	0.30	-0.72	0.83
COM	5-25	16.11	5.30	-0.30	-0.85	0.89
DAA	5-25	14.40	5.69	0.22	-0.98	0.92
SC	4-20	11.13	4.20	0.00	-0.96	0.88
SPP	4-20	10.52	4.00	0.37	-0.59	0.86
OOP	5-23	9.44	4.22	1.10	0.72	0.86
HC	4-19	8.78	3.59	0.76	0.05	0.80
ENT	4-18	7.79	3.33	0.97	0.46	0.75
GRAN	4-20	7.81	3.35	0.82	0.28	0.80
RP	10-47	29.74	7.87	0.14	-0.68	0.87
SCP	18-88	52.17	15.89	-0.03	-0.86	0.94
NP	17-68	33.82	11.14	0.75	-0.03	0.89
Rumination	21-60	46.28	9.17	-0.47	-0.49	0.90
Reflection	16-59	41.90	9.50	-0.02	-0.78	0.89

SOP – Self-oriented perfectionism; **SWC** – Self-worth contingencies; **COM** – Concern over mistakes; **DAA** – Doubts about action; **SC** – Self-criticism; **SPP** – Socially-prescribed perfectionism; **OOP** – Other-oriented perfectionism; **HC** – Hypercriticism; **ENT** – Entitlement; **GRAN** – Grandiosity; **RP** – Rigid perfectionism; **SCP** – Self-critical perfectionism; **NP** – Narcissistic perfectionism.

Tab. 2. Descriptive statistics

engagement in learning about oneself (Reflections subscale). The respondents were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point rating scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The theoretical score range for both subscales is identical at 12–60. The reliability coefficient obtained in the adaptive test for the Ruminations subscale reached 0.86 in the high school student group and 0.89 in the student group, while in the Reflection subscale it reached 0.85 and 0.88, respectively, which is comparable to the original version, where Cronbach's α was 0.90 (Słowińska et al., 2014).

The reliability coefficients obtained in the present study are also high (see Tab. 2).

2. The Big Three Perfectionism Scale (BTPS) by Smith et al. (2016) was used to measure perfectionism. The research was conducted using a version of the scale in a Polish translation (three independent translations, a question comprehension test, and retranslation). Prior to the main part of the study, a pilot study was conducted to verify both the quality of the translation and the internal consistency, assessed using Cronbach's α. Full analyses (exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and external validity assessment), as well as the Polish adaptation, are currently under development. The scale consists of 45 statements across 10 subfactors: Self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), Self-worth contingencies (SWC), Concern over mistakes (COM), Doubts about action (DAA), Self-criticism (SC), Socially-prescribed perfectionism (SPP), Other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), Hypercriticism (HC), Entitlement (ENT), Grandiosity (GRAN); and three main dimensions: Rigid perfectionism (RP), Self-critical perfectionism (SCP), Narcissistic perfectionism (NP). The respondents were asked to rate each statement on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The theoretical range of scores for the SOP, SWC, COM, DAA, and OOP subfactors is 5–25, and for the SC, SPP, HC, ENT, and GRAN subfactors it is 5–20. For the main dimensions, the theoretical score ranges for the scales are as follows: RP (10–50), SCP (18–90), NP (17–85). In the original method, internal consistency measured by Cronbach's α ranged from 0.79 to 0.89 for the subfactors and from 0.92 to 0.93 for the main dimensions (Smith et al., 2016). Tab. 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the variables and the reliability coefficients, while Tab. 3 provides the correlation matrix.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Self-oriented perfectionism (1)														
Self-worth contingencies (2)	0.67**													
Concern over mistakes (3)	0.32**	0.42**												
Doubts about action (4)	0.28**	0.44**	0.74**											
Self-criticism (5)	0.54**	0.66**	0.70**	0.68**										
Socially-prescribed perfectionism (6)	0.22**	0.20**	0.40**	0.42**	0.41**									
Other-oriented perfectionism (7)	0.38**	0.40**	0.29**	0.24**	0.37**	0.28**								
Hypercriticism (8)	0.16*	0.24**	0.31**	0.23**	0.31**	0.21**	0.66**							
Entitlement (9)	0.16*	0.31**	0.20**	0.13	0.27**	0.12	0.45**	0.42**						
Grandiosity (10)	0.17*	0.19**	-0.08	-0.14	0.04	0.11	0.35**	0.28**	0.53**					
Rumination (11)	0.30**	0.40**	0.61**	0.54**	0.57**	0.28**	0.19**	0.23**	0.14	-0.14				
Reflection (12)	0.12	0.00	-0.10	-0.14	0.02	-0.09	0.00	0.04	0.10	0.07	0.16*			
Rigid perfectionism (13)	0.90**	0.93**	0.41**	0.40**	0.66**	0.23**	0.43**	0.22**	0.26**	0.20**	0.39**	0.12		
Self-critical perfectionism (14)	0.40**	0.52**	0.88**	0.89**	0.85**	0.64**	0.35**	0.32**	0.22**	-0.04	0.62**	-0.10	0.51**	
Narcissistic perfectionism (15)	0.30**	0.38**	0.25**	0.16*	0.34**	0.24**	0.83**	0.78**	0.76**	0.68**	0.15*	0.06	0.37**	0.29**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Tab. 3. Correlation matrix between the variables

RESULTS

The values of skewness and kurtosis in the study group indicate a normal distribution of scores (for skewness from -0.30 to 1.10 on the BTPS scale and -0.47 to -0.017 on the RRQ scale, and for kurtosis from -0.98 to 0.72 on the BTPS scale and -0.78 to -0.49 on the RRQ scale).

A multivariate regression analysis was conducted to verify the hypotheses. The results are presented in Tab. 4.

A regression analysis was conducted in which the predictors were rigid perfectionism, self-critical perfectionism, and narcissistic perfectionism, and the dependent variable was Ruminations. Based on the regression coefficients, self-critical perfectionism was found to be the only significant predictor ($B = 0.58; p < 0.001$). The standardised coefficient of beta indicates that higher levels of self-critical perfectionism are associated with increased ruminations. The proposed model fits the data well $F_{(3,179)} = 38.71; p < 0.001$, and explains 38% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.383$). In contrast, for the model with Reflexivity as the dependent variable, the significant predictors were rigid perfectionism ($B = 0.21; p < 0.05$) and self-critical perfectionism ($B = -0.22; p < 0.01$). The standardised beta coefficient indicates that higher levels of rigid perfectionism and lower levels of self-critical perfectionism are associated with greater intensity of reflection. The proposed model was also found to fit the data well $F_{(3,179)} = 3.16; p < 0.05$, but it explains only 3.4% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.034$).

	Rumination		Reflection	
	B	p	B	p
Rigid perfectionism	0.12	0.099	0.21	0.018
Self-critical perfectionism	0.58	<0.001	-0.22	0.009
Narcissistic perfectionism	-0.06	0.308	0.05	0.527
$R^2_{adj.}$	0.383		0.034	
$F_{(3,179)}$	38.71; $p < 0.001$		3.16; $p = 0.026$	

Tab. 4. Multivariate regression analysis

Perfectionism subdimensions	Rumination		Reflection	
	B	p	B	p
Self-oriented perfectionism	0.03	0.723	0.15	0.160
Self-worth contingencies	0.11	0.208	0.05	0.683
Concern over mistakes	0.33	<0.001	-0.11	0.350
Doubts about action	0.07	0.440	-0.21	0.084
Self-criticism	0.18	0.089	0.14	0.304
Socially-prescribed perfectionism	0.02	0.703	-0.05	0.539
Other-oriented perfectionism	-0.08	0.336	-0.14	0.220
Hypercriticism	0.10	0.220	0.10	0.320
Entitlement	0.06	0.430	0.13	0.167
Grandiosity	-0.17	0.019	-0.06	0.547
$R^2_{adj.}$	0.413		0.032	
$F_{(10,172)}$	13.831; $p < 0.001$		1.600; $p = 0.110$	

Tab. 5. Multivariate regression analysis

It was also decided to check which specific subfactors explain the levels of Reflection and Ruminations. A multivariate regression analysis was similarly conducted for all subdimensions of perfectionism. The results are presented in Tab. 5.

Based on the regression coefficients, significant predictors of ruminations were concern over mistakes ($B = 0.33; p < 0.001$), grandiosity ($B = -0.17; p < 0.05$), and, to a lesser extent, self-criticisms ($B = 0.18; p = 0.089$). The proposed model fits the data well $F_{(10,172)} = 13.83; p < 0.001$ and explains 41.3% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.413$). In the case of Reflexivity, on the other hand, the only factor with relatively weak predictive power was doubts about action $B = -0.21; p = 0.084$. However, the model was insignificant as a whole $F_{(10,172)} = 1.600; p = 0.110$.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the relationship between two forms of self-consciousness (ruminative and reflective) and perfectionism in its three dimensions: rigid, critical, and narcissistic (BTPS). The results of the analysis confirm Hypothesis H1 – Perfectionism is strongly positively related to ruminations, primarily through subfactors (with the exception of grandiosity, which shows a negative relationship).

Although the reflective style of self-consciousness is explained by two major factors of the BTPS (rigid perfectionism positively and self-critical negatively), this is not reflected in the subfactor analysis. In addition, the proportion of explained variance is low, and the model does not fit the data. This means that Hypothesis H2 was not confirmed. The level of reflexivity depends on other factors that were not the focus of this study (e.g. gender, education, age, or marital status).

Thus, it can be concluded that for the reflective form of self-consciousness, only perfectionism, understood as a relatively broad phenomenon involving certain self-criticism or rigidity, is of some, but very little, importance. Reflexivity, as cognitive curiosity about oneself, represents a more mature way of functioning (Słowińska et al., 2014), for which perfectionism is unnecessary. Reflective individuals exhibit conscious self-centeredness in naming and interpreting their internal reality (Trapnell and Campbell, 1999). The motivation for developing reflective private self-consciousness is the desire to know oneself rather than anxiety. Thus, they seem to be two independent constructs.

Conversely, perfectionism is strongly linked to critical self-examination and shares significant similarities with the ruminative form of self-consciousness. Rumination exhibits the strongest connection with self-critical perfectionism. According to Trapnell and Campbell's (1999) theory, rumination is understood as prolonged concentration and analysis of one's thoughts, usually rooted in the past. In the framework of Smith et al. (2016), self-critical perfectionism involves both past events and future anticipations.

If a person fears making a mistake in the future, they may ruminate in order to reduce the likelihood of errors or to develop effective ways of dealing with a situation that has already occurred. On the other hand, ruminations about the past create a space for self-criticism, connected with evaluations of the person and their behaviours, and, consequently, with emotions. This may imply that a person with low self-esteem or a sense of inadequacy may try to avoid situations in which these beliefs about the self may be activated. In this way, self-critical perfectionism becomes a strategy which, by increasing ruminations (i.e. thinking about past and potential failures) in the person's view, protects them from committing more mistakes. It is worth noting that the sub-dimension of concern over mistakes is the strongest predictor of ruminations, further supported to some extent by the dimension of self-criticism, which reinforces this understanding of its importance.

Conversely, a belief in one's own greatness protects against ruminations. An individual who thinks of themselves as someone resourceful and better than others does not need to focus critically on their imperfections because, in their perception, they are devoid of flaws. When mistakes happen, such a person tends to look for the causes of these mistakes in other people. In contrast, the lower the level of perfectionistic grandiosity and the weaker a person's opinion of themselves, the more strongly they will focus on ruminating about negative events, thoughts, and emotions.

The findings on the relationship between self-critical perfectionism and rumination are consistent with other studies, for example those on social phobia (Modini and Abbott, 2017; Newby et al., 2017). The positive relationship between perfectionism, ruminations, and social anxiety is well reflected in Abdollahi's study's results (2019), which demonstrated a partial mediating effect of ruminations between perfectionism related to fear of mistakes and social anxiety. Perfectionism associated with concern over mistakes can lead individuals into ruminative thinking, which may result in avoidance of social interactions and heightened anxiety in interactions with the social environment (Flett et al., 2011).

The present study found no significant relationship between narcissistic perfectionism and ruminations. Similar conclusions were reached by DiBartolo et al. (2008) in their study of personal standards perfectionism and social anxiety. Personal standards perfectionists, much like narcissists, strive for personal achievement and are not interested in negative social evaluations, so they do not ruminate about them. Therefore, personal standards perfectionists are more inclined to engage in social situations (Levinson et al., 2013).

The results obtained in the present study on ruminations and self-critical perfectionism are consistent with the findings reported by Casale et al. (2020). Both showed that elevated levels of self-critical perfectionism are significantly associated with ruminations. In a study of young Italian adults, elevated levels of self-critical perfectionism were associated with ruminations about the need to be perfect and

the failure to achieve ideals and goals (Casale et al., 2020). Similarly, the present study of a sample of Polish young adults also found a significant relationship between self-critical perfectionism and concern over mistakes, which is a component of the process of striving for perfection.

CONCLUSIONS

The presented study is probably the first to expand the understanding of the new conceptualisation of the phenomenon of perfectionism in relation to two forms of private self-consciousness: reflexive and ruminative. The study's results confirm the association between perfectionism and ruminations, while indicating that it has no significant impact on reflexivity.

The study's findings may be helpful for psychotherapists working with individuals with perfectionistic personality traits. Ruminations can hinder the therapeutic process by perpetuating negative thoughts about oneself, focusing on mistakes or fearing them. In order to speed up the therapeutic process, therapists can either target the patient's negative thoughts about the self, which can reduce perfectionistic striving, or focus directly on the patient's perfectionism itself, which will reduce the level of ruminations and allow the patient to reduce psychological distress about the fear of making mistakes.

Several limitations of the study should be noted. The survey was conducted online, which meant that there was no control over the accuracy and reliability of the responses. Therefore, it was impossible to check whether the participants had provided truthful information in the survey metrics. Furthermore, due to the correlational nature of the survey, no cause-and-effect relationships could be identified. The relatively small study group was limited by age (18–30 years), which may have affected the results obtained for the reflexivity variable. Research shows that reflexivity increases with age (Dewitte and Dezutter, 2021). In the future, care may be taken to study a more representative age group to learn about the relationship between perfectionism and reflection in a broader age sample. In addition, the majority of the respondents were women; therefore, further studies should consider the aspect of gender distribution. This will allow an analysis of gender differences in perfectionism.

Conflict of interest

The authors do not report any financial or personal connections with other persons or organisations which might negatively affect the contents of this publication and/or claim authorship rights to this publication.

Author contribution

Original concept of study; writing of manuscript; critical review of manuscript: KJ, ND, DM. Collection, recording and/or compilation of data: KJ, ND. Analysis and interpretation of data: ND, DM. Final approval of manuscript: KJ.

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