



## Effects of Faking Good and Faking Bad on Students' Perceptions of the Social Desirability of Perfectionism

Katherine A. Johanson  
*Minnesota State University Moorhead*

The present study examined students' perceptions of the social desirability of perfectionism as it is viewed in the eyes of professors and peers. As little empirical research has examined this subject, this study utilized an experimental approach in its investigation. Sixty undergraduate students were randomly assigned to condition (fake good/peers, fake good/professors, fake bad/peers, fake bad/professors, honest/peers, honest/professors) and given special instructions to fake good or bad images of themselves as judged by their peers or professors before completing a questionnaire measuring self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. It was expected that participants in the fake good conditions would perceive all forms of perfectionism as more desirable than participants in the control and fake bad conditions. It was also expected that participants in the peer judgment conditions would perceive socially prescribed perfectionism as more desirable than participants in the professor judgment conditions. Results illustrate that being instructed to fake good or bad images of themselves while completing the questionnaire significantly influenced participants' responses on measures of self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism, but not on measures of socially prescribed perfectionism. There was no significant difference in scores for judgment (peers vs. professors), nor was there an interaction between faking and judgment. These results suggest that self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism – but not socially prescribed perfectionism – are viewed by students as socially desirable.

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### *Multidimensional perfectionism*

Within the realm of psychological research, perfectionism is a well-studied concept, classically denoted by Horney (1950, p. 65) as the “tyranny of the shoulds.” One of personality traits, perfectionism is illustrated by the tendency to set excessively high standards for and critically assess oneself or others (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990). It is also marked by the possession of unrealistic expectations of perfection and flawlessness, those of which can interfere with well-being and success (Flett & Hewitt, 2002).

The dynamics of perfectionism have been accounted for by multiple models; among

them, Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model of multidimensional perfectionism has been extensively investigated. This model differentiates between three constructs of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism involves the goals and standards established for oneself, along with the rationalization that perfectionism is a necessary trait to possess. Conversely, other-oriented perfectionism encompasses the placement of high standards and expectations onto others, partnered with the belief that others should strive for perfection. Lastly, socially prescribed perfectionism involves the





standards and expectations that others hold for a person who, in turn, believes that fulfilling these expectations is necessary to gain social acceptance.

Examination of the elements of multidimensional perfectionism has yielded two constituents: adaptive perfectionism and maladaptive perfectionism (Rice, Ashby, & Slaney, 1998). Numerous studies have established connections between adaptive perfectionism and feelings of pride, accomplishment, positive mood, and conscientiousness (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993; Stoeber & Otto, 2006), and others have demonstrated connections between maladaptive perfectionism and feelings of guilt, shame, failure, low self-esteem, social anxiety, and social phobia (Fedewa, Burns, & Gomez, 2005; Juster, Heimberg, Frost, Holt, Mattia, and Faccenda, 1996; Sorotzkin, 1985). Moreover, factor analysis of these components has revealed that adaptive perfectionism is most strongly correlated with self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism, while maladaptive perfectionism is most strongly correlated with socially prescribed perfectionism (Stoeber et al., 2006).

### *Social desirability*

Social desirability, a concept interlaced with perfectionism, is measured by the over-reporting of good behaviors and the under-reporting of bad behaviors. By maximizing the reported frequency of socially desirable behaviors and minimizing that of socially undesirable behaviors, one is able to present a favorable image to others (Krumpal, 2013; Stoeber & Hotham, 2013).

Research investigating the association between perfectionism and social desirability has theorized that adaptive perfectionism is related to socially desirable behaviors and that maladaptive perfectionism is related to socially undesirable behaviors (Hewitt et al.,

1991; Stoeber, 2001; Stoeber et al., 2013). Whereas correlational studies produced mixed results regarding these relationships, a recent experimental study demonstrated that students perceived all three forms of perfectionism as socially desirable (Stoeber et al., 2013). Thus, the present study replicated Stoeber et al.'s (2013) methods in its own exploration of such relationships.

### *Peer Pressure*

Similar to social desirability, peer pressure involves behaving in ways that foster social acceptance. Peer pressure stems from expectations held by peer groups which dictate what activities group members should participate in and in which ways. These groups, typically comprised of friends, exert a tremendous amount of influence on members and often serve to nurture feelings of belonging, support, and recognition (Dacey & Travers, 1996).

According to Santor, Messervey, and Kusumakar (2000), the needs of group members increase throughout the lifetime – particularly during adolescence. During this period, an increased desire for social acceptance and recognition allows a group to exert more control over its members. This experience results in feelings of peer pressure and is most congruent with the demands embodied in socially prescribed perfectionism. Interestingly, previous research investigating this effect on behavior has found that group members are more influenced by what others think than by what they actually do (Fischhoff, Crowell, & Kipke, 1999). These findings not only underscore the significant role that perceptions play in peer pressure, but also highlight the effect that they have in determining how socially desirable (or undesirable) a particular trait or behavior is deemed – especially in the eyes of one's peers. It is this factor that the present study aims to investigate.

### *Implications*

In consideration of this review, it is apparent that the concepts of perfectionism, social desirability, and peer pressure have important implications in educational settings. In one study, Stoeber et al. (2013) demonstrated that students perceived all three forms of perfectionism as socially desirable – including the maladaptive form, socially prescribed perfectionism. Because this study was one of the first to employ an experimental approach, the impact of these findings is unclear: whereas perfectionistic tendencies could foster pride and a sense of accomplishment, as is consistent with adaptive perfectionism (Frost et al., 1993; Stoeber et al., 2013), they may also induce feelings of guilt, shame, and failure, as is consistent with maladaptive perfectionism (Fedewa et al., 2005; Juster et al., 1996; Sorotzkin, 1985). Therefore, the present research also aims to expound upon these relationships.


### *The Present Study*

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the social desirability of each form of perfectionism (self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed) as perceived by undergraduate students. Furthermore, the impact of peers' and professors' judgments on students' perceptions of perfectionism is examined. Because Stoeber et al. (2013) was one of the first researchers to employ an experimental approach while examining these relationships, a similar procedure was utilized in the present research.

In Stoeber et al.'s (2013) study, participants were asked to create a good impression of themselves, a bad impression, or provide honest answers while completing the short-form Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS), which measures the degree to which tendencies toward self-

oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism are exhibited. By means of a manipulation check utilizing a social desirability scale, it was apparent that, in faking a good image of themselves in the fake good condition, participants responded to the questionnaire in a socially desirable manner. Similarly, participants instructed to fake a bad image of themselves responded to the questionnaire in a socially undesirable manner. The aim of this study was to determine whether or not students perceive all three forms of perfectionism as socially desirable, which was measured covertly by instructing participants to respond to statements in a socially desirable or undesirable way while completing the MPS. The results yielded evidence documenting that every component of multidimensional perfectionism was perceived as socially desirable, as was indicated in participants' MPS scores. Thus, the first hypothesis of the present study states that participants faking good images of themselves will perceive all three forms of perfectionism as more desirable than participants faking bad images or giving honest answers.

An interesting component of Stoeber et al.'s (2013) study involves the specific instructions given to participants. While being asked to create good or bad images of themselves while completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to do so "...as judged by [their] lecturers (Stoeber et al., 2013)." Based on the demonstrated influence of peer pressure on behavior, it is possible for these instructions to elicit different responses based on who participants are told will be judging them. For example, if students are asked to complete the questionnaires in the eyes of their *peers*, their responses may differ significantly than if they are asked to complete it in the eyes of their *professors*. Because socially prescribed perfectionism best embodies the demands and



expectations of peer pressure, the second hypothesis of the present study states that participants being judged by their peers will perceive socially prescribed perfectionism as more desirable than participants being judged by their professors.

In the present study, participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions: fake good/peers, fake good/professors, fake bad/peers, fake bad/professors, honest/peers, or honest/professors. They were then given special instructions and asked to complete a shortened version of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) to determine the degree to which they scored on each form of perfectionism, producing three scores for each participant. Based on Stoeber et al.'s (2013) findings, the first hypothesis of the present study states that participants faking good images of themselves will perceive all three forms of perfectionism as more desirable than participants faking bad images or giving honest answers. In addition, it is expected that participants being judged by their peers will perceive socially prescribed perfectionism as more desirable than participants being judged by their professors.

## Method

### Participants

Sixty two participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at Minnesota State University Moorhead by means of a sign-up sheet within the Psychology Department. Because one participant did not complete the questionnaire and another participant verbalized hatred for perfectionism, data from these two participants were removed from analysis. Of the other 60 participants, thirty-four were female and 26 were male. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 46 years old with a mean

age of 23 years. Participants were compensated with extra credit issued by their psychology professors, and all participants were treated ethically as detailed in American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines.


### Materials

A shortened form of Hewitt and Flett's (1991) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale was used in this study. The current researcher obtained 15 questions from online sources which cited the original scale. This shortened questionnaire requires participants to respond to statements on a scale from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) that measure how strongly they score in self-oriented ("It makes me uneasy to see an error in my work"), other-oriented ("I have high expectations for the people who are important to me"), and socially prescribed perfectionism ("My family expects me to be perfect"). See Appendix A for the complete questionnaire.

Participants were given special instructions for completing the questionnaire based on their assigned condition. For example, participants in the fake good/professors condition were asked to create a good image of themselves as judged by their professors while completing the questionnaire. Participants in the remaining conditions (fake good/peers, fake bad/professors, fake bad/peers, honest/professors, honest/peers) received similar instructions, but positive words were replaced with negative words for the fake bad conditions. Participants in the honest conditions received instructions to provide honest answers while completing the questionnaire, simulating control groups. See Appendix B for complete instructions.

### Procedure

Each participant was tested individually in a quiet room. After obtaining informed consent, participants were randomly assigned



to one of six conditions: 1) fake good/professors, 2) fake good/peers, 3) fake bad/professors, 4) fake bad/peers, 5) honest/professors, or 6) honest/peers. After receiving special instructions based on condition, participants then completed the shortened MPS and sealed their responses in a manila envelope for anonymity purposes. After completing the questionnaire, participants received a general debriefing about perfectionism and its effects in academic settings. At the conclusion of the entire study, participants were emailed with the full debriefing, which stressed that participant responses were not actually shown to or evaluated by a professor or peer. Lastly, participants were given proof of participation for extra credit. The experiment lasted approximately 15 minutes.

### Results

Participants rated each question on the MPS using a scale from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). Each statement measured how strongly participants scored in self-oriented (“It makes me uneasy to see an error in my work”), other-oriented (“I have high expectations for the people who are important to me”), and socially prescribed perfectionism (“My family expects me to be perfect”). The present researcher calculated average MPS scores by adding up the ratings for each form of perfectionism and dividing by the number of questions (15 questions total: five questions for each form of perfectionism). Means and standard deviations for each condition are presented in Tables 1 and 2.


A 3x2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to see if instructions to fake good or bad influenced participants’ responses on the MPS, as well as to see if the source of judgment (peers vs. professors) interacted with instructions and

influenced responses. There was no significant main effect for judgment (peers vs. professors), nor was there a significant interaction between faking and judgment. Thus, the following analyses detail the significant main effect for faking by evaluating univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and follow-up comparisons. A significant main effect for faking was revealed, Wilks’  $\Lambda = .61$ ,  $F(6, 104) = 4.96$ ,  $p = .000$ , multivariate  $\eta^2 = .22$ . Specifically, significant differences were found for self-oriented perfectionism,  $F(2, 54) = 8.01$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .23$ , and other-oriented perfectionism,  $F(2, 54) = 7.66$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .22$ , but not for socially prescribed perfectionism,  $F(2, 54) = .53$ ,  $p > .05$ . In conducting Tukey’s post hoc analyses,  $\alpha = .025$  was used as a more stringent control for experimentwise error.

Post hoc analyses for self-oriented perfectionism revealed that participants scored significantly higher in the fake good condition than the fake bad condition ( $MD = 1.41$ ,  $p = .014$ ) and significantly lower in the fake bad condition than the honest condition ( $MD = 1.85$ ,  $p = .001$ ), as is displayed in Figure 1. Likewise, analyses for other-oriented perfectionism illustrate that participants scored significantly higher in the fake good condition than the fake bad condition ( $MD = 1.01$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and significantly lower in the fake bad condition than the honest condition ( $MD = .97$ ,  $p = .005$ ), as Figure 2 displays. No significant differences in responses were revealed for socially prescribed perfectionism, as is evident in Figure 3.

### Discussion

The present study was interested in examining students’ perceptions of the social desirability of multidimensional perfectionism. Additionally, it aimed to determine the impact of professors’ and peers’



judgments on such perceptions. To do this, participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions (fake good/peers, fake good/professors, fake bad/peers, fake bad/professors, honest/peers, honest/professors) and then given special instructions to fake good or bad images of themselves as judged by their peers or professors before completing a shortened version of Hewitt and Flett's (1991) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. It was expected that participants in the fake good conditions would perceive all forms of perfectionism as more desirable than participants in the control and fake bad conditions. It was also expected that participants in the peer judgment conditions would perceive socially prescribed perfectionism as more desirable than participants in the professor judgment conditions.

The results are partially consistent with previous research findings; whereas Stoeber et al. (2013) demonstrated that students perceived all three forms of multidimensional perfectionism as socially desirable, the present study revealed that only self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism were perceived as desirable. Thus, the first hypothesis was only supported in part.

The second hypothesis received no support; students in the peer judgment conditions did not perceive socially prescribed perfectionism as more desirable than students in the professor judgment conditions. Interestingly, though not significant, participants in the fake bad/peers condition scored higher than those in the fake bad/professors condition in both self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism, suggesting that students view self- and other-oriented perfectionism as less desirable when being judged by peers. For socially prescribed perfectionism, participants in the peer judgment conditions scored relatively equally to those in the professor judgment conditions

for both faking good and bad, suggesting that students view socially prescribed perfectionism with the same amount of desirability regardless of who is judging them.

This study's limitations encompass the number of participants, baseline perfectionism measures, and the validity of the questionnaire. First, a total of 60 participants (not including the two dropped from analysis) partook in the study, yet each condition had only 10 participants. Ideally, future studies would employ enough participants so that 30 are assigned to each condition. Secondly, baseline perfectionism was not measured before the study; thus, it cannot be determined if pre-existing perfectionistic tendencies influenced responses. Lastly, the self-constructed questionnaire utilized in this study was not evaluated for validity or reliability, further limiting the study's validity.

As many studies have thus far been correlational, future research should seek to employ an experimental method in its investigation of perfectionism and social desirability. In addition, future studies should address the salience of the manipulation; as participants were asked to complete the MPS while simply imagining that a professor or peer would review their responses, it is likely that the presence of a real professor or peer would elicit stronger responses. Future studies could also investigate other models of perfectionism and how they relate to social desirability.

Little experimental research has investigated the relationship between perfectionism and social desirability; as such, the present results shed an interesting light in this field. Notably, it was revealed that students do not perceive socially prescribed perfectionism as desirable, contrary to Stoeber et al.'s (2013) findings. With regards to perfectionism, it appears that students are selective: they perceive self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism as desirable, but



not socially prescribed perfectionism. Furthermore, these preferences remain constant under the judgment of both professors and peers. Fortunately, these findings have positive implications in academic settings; it appears that students' perceptions of perfectionism are more congruent with the tenets of adaptive perfectionism (inclusive of self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism) than they are with maladaptive perfectionism (inclusive of socially prescribed perfectionism).

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Table 1

*Mean scores for self-oriented (SOP), other-oriented (OOP), and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) across faking*

	Fake Good	Fake Bad	Honest
SOP			
<i>M (SD)</i>	4.70 (1.31)	3.29 (1.98)	5.14 (1.05)
OOP			
<i>M (SD)</i>	4.43 (.81)	3.42 (1.21)	4.39 (.66)
SPP			
<i>M (SD)</i>	4.07 (1.29)	4.13 (1.37)	4.49 (1.44)

Table 2  
*Mean scores for self-oriented (SOP), other-oriented (OOP), and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) across judgment*

	Peers	Professors
SOP		
<i>M (SD)</i>	4.51 (1.62)	4.25 (1.74)
OOP		
<i>M (SD)</i>	4.27 (.99)	3.89 (1.04)
SPP		
<i>M (SD)</i>	4.31 (1.33)	4.15 (1.40)

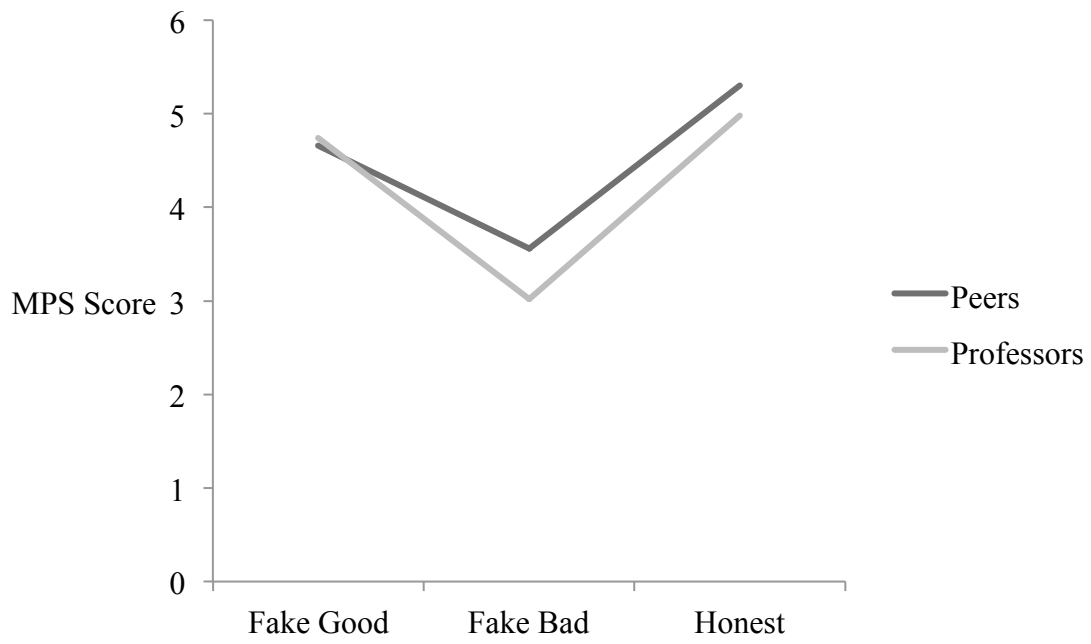
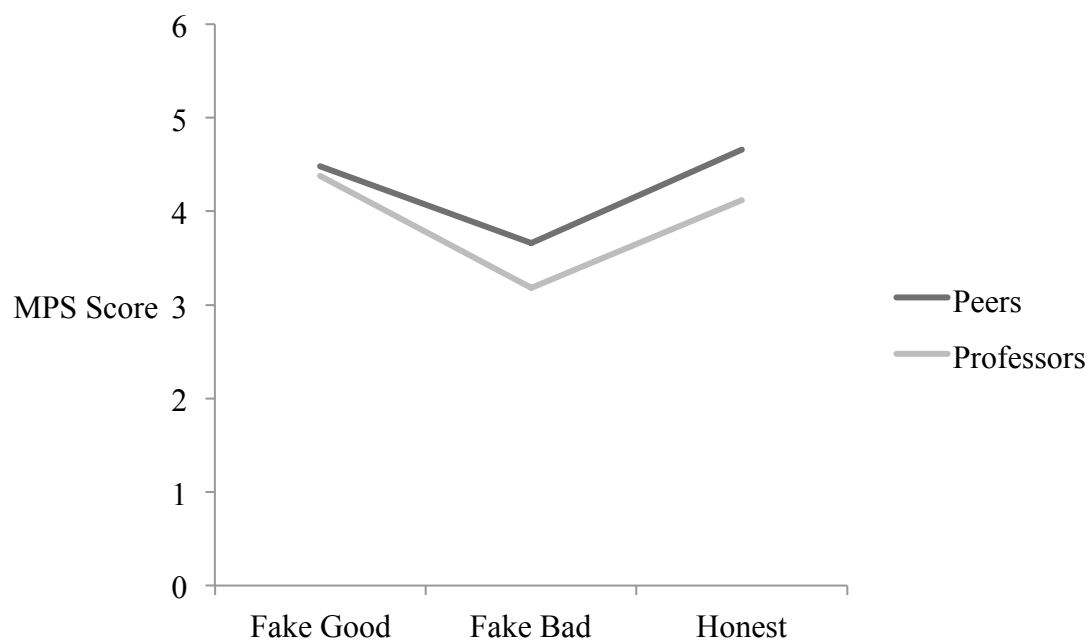


Figure 1. Mean scores for SOP across conditions by source of judgment.



*Figure 2.* Mean scores for OOP across conditions by source of judgment.

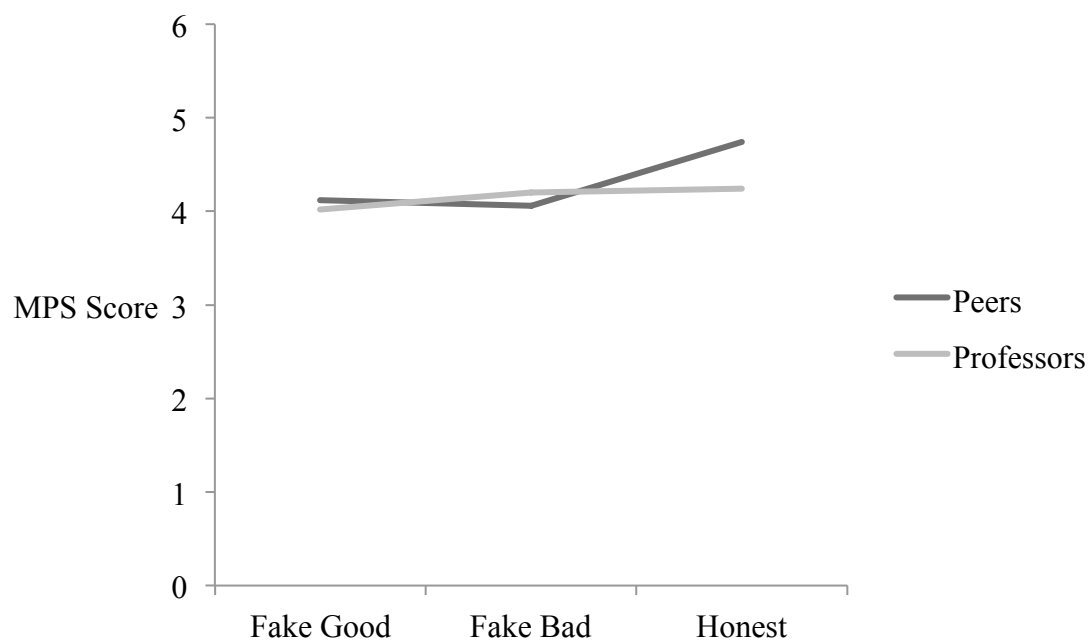


Figure 3. Mean scores for SPP across conditions by source of judgment.

## Appendix A

Shortened Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale adapted from Hewitt and Flett (1991)  
(1: strongly disagree, 7: strongly agree)

### Self-oriented perfectionism:

- 1) It makes me uneasy to see an error in my work.
- 2) I am perfectionistic in setting my goals.
- 3) One of my goals is to be perfect in everything I do.
- 4) When I am working on something, I cannot relax until it is perfect.
- 5) I set very high standards for myself.

### Other-oriented perfectionism:


- 1) I have high expectations for the people who are important to me.
- 2) An average performance by someone I know is unsatisfactory.
- 3) I do not have very high standards for those around me.
- 4) If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly.
- 5) I do not expect a lot from my friends.

### Socially prescribed perfectionism:

- 1) The better I do, the better I am expected to do.
- 2) People expect nothing less than perfection from me.
- 3) I feel that people are too demanding of me.
- 4) My family expects me to be perfect.
- 5) The people around me expect me to succeed at everything I do.

## Statements derived from the following sources:

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## Appendix B

Instructions adapted from Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, and Butera (2009) via Stoeber et al. (2013)

Instructions for participants in the judgments from professors/fake good condition:

“Create a good image of yourself-as judged by your professors at the university. As you fill in the following questionnaire, I would like you to try and generate a good image of yourself, that is, to answer in such a way as to be judged in a positive way by your professors, while imagining that one of them will review your responses on the questionnaire.”

Instructions for participants in the judgments from peers/fake good condition:

“Create a good image of yourself-as judged by your peers at the university. As you fill in the following questionnaire, I would like you to try and generate a good image of yourself, that is, to answer in such a way as to be judged in a positive way by your peers, while imagining that one of them will review your responses on the questionnaire.”

Instructions for participants in the judgments from professors/fake bad condition:

“Create a bad image of yourself-as judged by your professors at the university. As you fill in the following questionnaire, I would like you to try and generate a bad image of yourself, that is, to answer in such a way as to be judged in a negative way by your professors, while imagining that one of them will review your responses on the questionnaire.”

Instructions for participants in the judgments from peers/fake bad condition:

“Create a bad image of yourself-as judged by your peers at the university. As you fill in the following questionnaire, I would like you to try and generate a bad image of yourself, that is, to answer in such a way as to be judged in a negative way by your peers, while imagining that one of them will review your responses on the questionnaire.”

Instructions for participants in the judgments from professors/honest condition:

“As you fill in the following questionnaire, I would like you to indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements. I am interested in how you personally see yourself, so please answer in an honest way while imagining that one of your professors at the university will review your responses on the questionnaire.”

Instructions for participants in the judgments from peers/honest condition:

“As you fill in the following questionnaire, I would like you to indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements. I am interested in how you personally see yourself, so please





answer in an honest way while imagining that one of your peers at the university will review your responses on the questionnaire.”