

Adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism: The impact on graduate student health



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Introduction

- Perfectionism is considered a diverse construct with both positive and negative features¹ - each of which is related to outcomes of similar valence (e.g., maladaptive perfectionism has been related to poorer psychological², social³, and health⁴ outcomes and adaptive perfectionism is related to more beneficial mental and health outcomes^{1,3}).
- Much of the research on perfectionism has been conducted on undergraduate students, and is largely concurrent in nature.
- Previous research has also examined dimensions of perfectionism, focusing on the different subscales and their association with outcomes.
- The purpose of this study was to prospectively examine the dimensions as they co-occur within individuals. More specifically, we investigated perfectionism types, or groups, (e.g., adaptive, maladaptive, and non-perfectionist) and their association with mental, social, and physical health of graduate students in health sciences disciplines.**

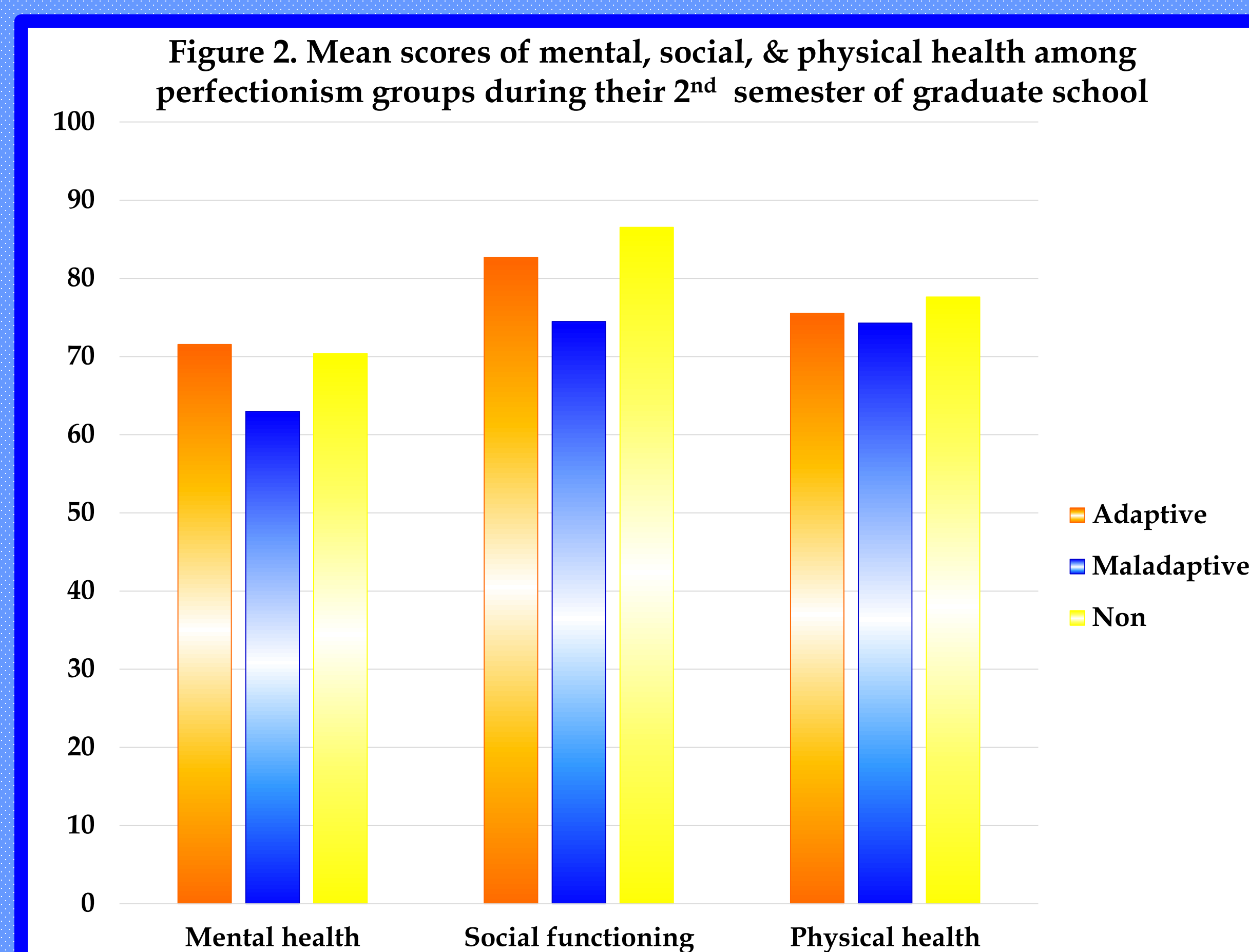
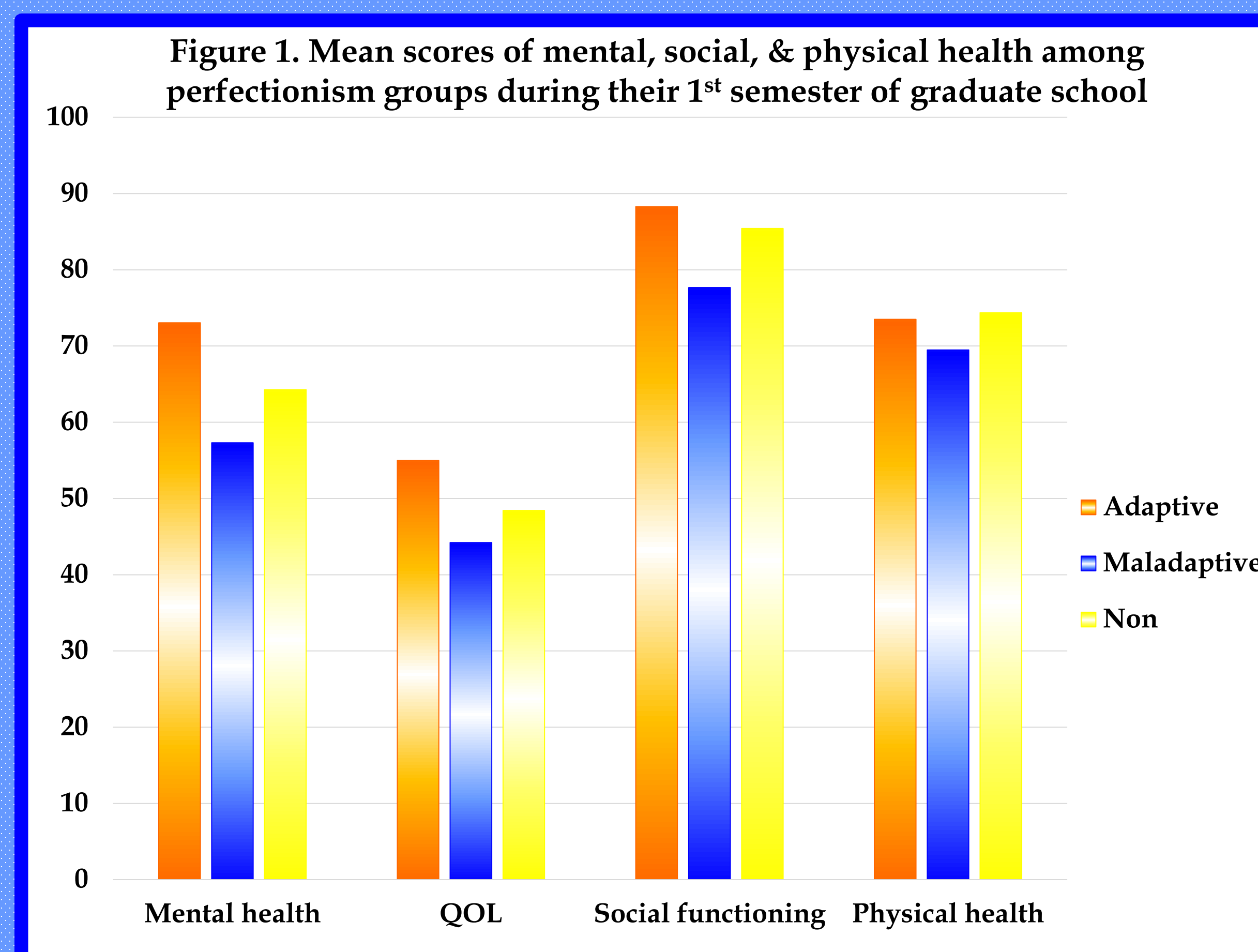
Method & Protocol

- 92 graduate students (91% Caucasian; 82% female; $M_{age}=22.11$, $SD=3.11$) in graduate Health Science programs from a small northeastern university participated in the current study.
- After providing informed consent, participants completed surveys during the first week of graduate school, as well as at midterms, during each of four semesters.
- Measures used in the current study were assessed at mid-term of participants' first and second semesters, with the exception of Quality of Life (QOL); it was assessed only during the first semester.
- Participants were categorized into perfectionism groups based on median splits of their perfectionistic strivings (Median=26) & perfectionistic concerns (Median=34) subscale scores of Frost's MPS⁵: Adaptive perfectionists had high strivings and low concerns; maladaptive perfectionists had high strivings and high concerns; non-perfectionists had low strivings.

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Measures

- Perfectionism:** The MPS-F⁵ measures 6 dimensions of perfectionism on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree ; 5=strongly agree). We used the personal standards subscale as a proxy for perfectionistic strivings (i.e., adaptive perfectionism) and a summative composite of the concerns over mistakes + doubts about actions subscales to indicate perfectionistic concerns (i.e., maladaptive perfectionism)¹. Higher scores represent higher perfectionism.
- Mental health, social functioning, & physical health:** The RAND 36-item Health Survey Version 1.0⁶ assesses 8 health-related domains. We used a 5-item scale of mental health, a 2-item scale of social functioning, and a 5-item scale measuring general physical health. Scores were created using a norm-based computer program. Higher scores reflect more favorable health in that domain.
- Quality of life (QOL):** The QOL Inventory⁷ measures life satisfaction across 16 areas. Participants rated both the importance (0=not important -2=extremely important) and satisfaction (-3=very dissatisfied - 3=very satisfied) of each domain. Scores were converted using a norm-based computer program. Higher scores indicate higher QOL.



Results

- Adaptive perfectionists were statistically significantly higher in mental health scores than maladaptive perfectionists, across both semesters** ($p=.003$). Non-perfectionists were marginally higher ($p=.078$) than maladaptive and marginally lower ($p=.067$) than adaptive perfectionists.
- Adaptive perfectionists were statistically higher in QOL (during the first semester) than maladaptive perfectionists** ($p=.003$), and marginally higher than non-perfectionists ($p=.069$).
- There was a **marginal difference** between the three groups in regards to **social functioning** across the two semesters ($p=.064$), such that maladaptive perfectionists were statistically significantly lower than average ($p=.026$).
- There were **no significant differences in general physical health** between adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and non-perfectionists across semesters ($p=.629$).
- Figures 1 & 2 illustrate Mean outcome scores for each semester.**

Exploratory analyses

- Given the high Median (and minimum) scores on the perfectionism measure in our graduate student sample, we conducted exploratory analyses to examine the hypothesis treating all participants as perfectionists with high perfectionistic strivings scores.
- In these new analyses, **adaptive perfectionists were statistically significantly better on mental ($p<.001$), social ($p=.003$), and health ($p=.033$) outcomes than maladaptive perfectionists.**

Conclusions

- Similar to prior research, **our results demonstrate perfectionism's multidimensional construct and its complex relationship with health-related outcomes.**
- Specifically, adaptive perfectionism was associated with better mental health, quality of life, and, to some extent, social functioning among our graduate student participants.
- Adaptive perfectionism was not related to better physical health, as predicted. Other research has established a connection between perfectionism and specific symptomology⁴, as well as more indirect relationships between the two. Thus, future research should examine **other potential mediators in the relationship between perfectionism and physical health.**
- Our categorization of the different perfectionism types, based on median splits, may have been inadequate given our sample's general propensity towards high perfectionistic strivings. Researchers have suggested that it may be **more appropriate to adopt a more advanced statistical modeling procedure in differentiating perfectionists from non-perfectionists.** This may be particularly important for those in graduate and medical training programs.
- Our limitations included a very limited sample size, demographics, and time frame. Research should conduct a more long-term longitudinal analysis of graduate students beyond their first year, for the duration of graduate school.
- Overall, however, our research continues to provide valuable information in understanding the nuanced outcomes associated with perfectionism. Moreover, this knowledge can help shape our support for graduate students.**

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