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### Perfectionism and Marital Satisfaction among Graduate Students: A Multigroup Invariance Analysis by Counseling Help-seeking Attitudes

**Abstract:** This study aims to measure the latent mean difference in perfectionism and marital satisfaction by counseling help-seeking attitudes. The respondents were 327 married graduate students from a research university in Malaysia. An online self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data. The respondents completed the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised, Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale, Marital Satisfaction Scale, and Attitudes toward Seeking Professional Psychology Help Scale. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine the instruments and the results indicated that construct validity were achieved. The latent mean difference in perfectionism and marital satisfaction by counseling help-seeking attitudes were tested using multigroup invariance analysis. The respondents with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking ( $n = 159$ ) reported a higher latent mean in perfectionism but a lower latent mean in marital satisfaction compared to those with positive attitudes toward counseling help-seeking ( $n = 168$ ). The implications of these findings for counseling services are discussed.

**Key words:** perfectionism, marital satisfaction, counseling help-seeking attitudes, graduate students, latent mean analysis, multigroup invariance analysis

Counseling is a “professional assistance in coping with personal problems, including emotional, behavioral, vocational, marital, educational, rehabilitation, and life-stage (e.g. retirement) problems” (“Counseling,” 2006, p. 237). The process of counseling help-seeking could be a complicated process. It starts from problem recognition, leading to treatment consideration, and finally treatment seeking (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003). Theory of planned behaviors propagates that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control determined one’s intention to engage in the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). In general, those who have favorable attitudes and expectation from their significant others, as well as have enough resources and opportunities are more likely to have the intention to engage in the behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Mo & Mak, 2009). For instance, for those with positive attitudes toward counseling help-seeking, they are most likely seeking counseling services when facing life difficulties.

Psychological help-seeking attitudes are defined as “an attitude and personality domain which applies to

one’s tendency to seek or to resist professional aid during a personal crisis or following prolonged psychological discomfort” (Fischer & Turner, 1970, p. 79). It consists of four dimensions, namely recognition of the need for psychological help, stigma tolerance, interpersonal openness, and confidence in mental health practitioners (Fischer & Turner, 1970). In reference to Fischer and Turner’s definition of counseling help-seeking, people with positive attitudes toward counseling help-seeking are more likely to engage in counseling services for coping with personal problems. Similarly, people with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking are less likely seeking counseling services when facing life challenges.

Although universities are providing counseling services, not all students experiencing challenges are keen in utilizing the services. Despite the acknowledgment and awareness that counseling could be a helpful resource in coping with challenges (“Counseling,” 2006), some people have stigma in regards to seeking help outside of the family system (Pasupuleti, 2013). It is probably due to the culture of face-

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saving that is common among Malaysian (Talib, 2010). One is not supposed to disclose personal matters, particularly those associated with negative image to a third-party outside of the immediate family. By identifying the help-seeking attitudes, the counselors could customize the advertising and promoting strategies for the students, thus bridging the service gap.

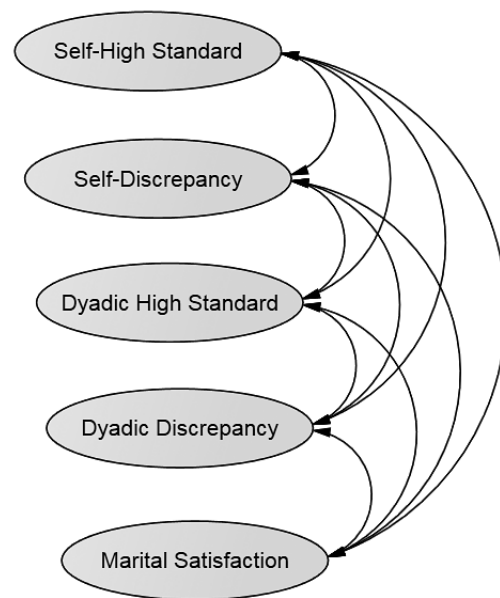
The literature revealed the relationships between perfectionism and help-seeking attitudes. Rasmussen, Yamawaki, Moses, Powell, and Bastian (2013) tested perfectionism as a predictor of help-seeking attitudes among undergraduate students. The multiple linear regression analysis found that doubts about actions and concerns over mistakes are negative predictors of help-seeking attitudes. Thus, those with high scores in doubt about action and concerns over mistakes were less likely to seek professional help in time of needs. The finding was consistent with another research conducted by DeRosa (2000), whereby the result showed that those with high scores in perfectionist self-presentation were negatively related to help-seeking attitude. DeRosa suggested that the unwillingness to disclose imperfection to others is a major barrier in the help-seeking process. In addition, cultural studies also reported that Asians tend to have high perfectionism (Balboa, 2013). The Asian American are more perfectionistic than the American and African-American college students (Castro & Rice, 2003; Kawamura, 1999).

The literature also reported the relationship between marital satisfaction and help-seeking. Onsy and Amer (2014) found that individuals with high marital satisfaction tend to have more negative attitudes toward help-seeking. As the individuals experience few marital issues and problems, they need little help from the professional services. Using the analysis of actor-partner effect, Fleming and Córdova (2012) found that the wife's marital satisfaction is a negative predictor of self's help-seeking behaviors and spouse's help-seeking behaviors. Wives with a higher marital satisfaction engage less in the relationship of help-seeking activities; in both formal and informal help. However, Bradley (2011) could not find the statistical evidence of the relationship between help-seeking attitudes and marital satisfaction. Therefore, there were no concluding findings on the relationship between marital satisfaction and help-seeking.

### Research Aims

This research examined the latent mean difference in perfectionism and marital satisfaction by counseling help-seeking attitudes among graduate students. Specifically, it tested five hypotheses: (1) There is a significant latent mean difference in the self-high standards by counseling help-seeking attitudes, (2) There is a significant latent mean difference in self-discrepancy by counseling help-seeking attitudes, (3) There is a significant latent mean difference in the dyadic high standards by counseling help-seeking attitudes, (4) There is a significant latent mean difference in dyadic discrepancy by counseling help-seeking attitudes, and (5) There is a significant latent mean difference in marital satisfaction by counseling help-seeking attitudes.

Figure 1.



### Method

#### Sample

The research was conducted at a research university in Malaysia. The respondents were selected randomly and 327 married graduate students (91 men and 236 women) were involved. The average age of the respondents was 36.04 (SD = 6.93). Two-hundred and five respondents (63%) were pursuing master degree, and 112 respondents (37%) were pursuing doctoral degree. One hundred and thirty-two respondents (40%) were with a monthly family income of MYR10,000 and more. All the respondents were married with the mean of the duration of marriage of 9.36 years.

Data was collected using an online questionnaire generated using Google Forms. As most of the graduate students are away from campus most of the time (Fairchild, 2003), the online questionnaire is a very useful survey tool to reach them. Token of appreciation (a food voucher worth MYR 5.00) was delivered to respondents via postal mail.

#### Instruments

##### *Almost Perfect Scale-Revised*

Self-perfectionism was measured using the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). The subscales of high standards (8 items) and discrepancy (11 items) were used. The response format is a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The convergent validity of Almost Perfect Scale-Revised was examined using the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) while its internal consistency was examined using the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. The CFA of the initial model reported the item loading of item-3 was low ( $\lambda < .50$ ) and there were six pairs of items with correlated error (4↔7, 16↔17, 18↔14, 14↔1, 14↔8, 12↔15). The model was then

respecified by deleting item-3 and freeing the correlated errors. The CFA of the final model of achieved convergent validity ( $AVE_{HS} = .567$ ;  $AVE_{Disc} = .536$ ). The internal consistency for self-high standards and self-discrepancy were high ( $\alpha_{HS} = .900$ ;  $\alpha_{Disc} = .929$ ).

#### *Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale*

The dyadic perfectionism was measured using the Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale (Shea, Slaney, & Rice, 2006). The Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale was developed based on the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised with the items on relationship context (Slaney et al., 2001). The dyadic high standards (6 items) and dyadic discrepancy (16 items) subscales were used. The response format is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

The convergent validity of Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale was examined using CFA while its internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. The CFA of the initial model of DAPS showed low factor loading of items-2, 14, and 18 ( $\lambda < .5$ ) and three pairs of items with correlated errors (21↔4, 10↔22, 13↔15). Thus, the model was respecified by deleting items-2, 14, and 18 and freeing the correlated errors. The CFA of the final model of DAPS achieved convergent validity ( $AVE_{HS} = .554$ ;  $AVE_{Disc} = .536$ ). The internal consistency for dyadic high standards and dyadic discrepancy were high ( $\alpha_{HS} = .884$ ;  $\alpha_{Disc} = .934$ ).

#### *Marital Satisfaction Scale*

The marital satisfaction was measured using the Marital Satisfaction Scale (Olson & Larson, 2008). It measures the satisfaction in ten areas of marriage, namely communication, conflict resolution, partner style and habits, family and friends, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, spiritual beliefs, and roles and responsibilities. The Scale consists of 10 items. The response format is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

The convergent validity of Marital Satisfaction Scale was examined using CFA while its internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. The CFA of the initial model indicated that item-2R and 5R were not significant items. Hence, these two items were deleted. In addition, parceling approach of subset-item-parcel approach was used and three parcels were built based on factorial algorithm (Parcel 1 = 8R + 7 + 1, Parcel 2 = 4R + 3 + 9, Parcel 3 = 6R + 10). The revised model achieved convergent validity ( $AVE = .538$ ) and high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .748$ ).

#### *Counseling Help-seeking Attitudes*

The counseling help-seeking attitudes were measured by the Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (Fischer & Turner, 1970). It consists of 29 items that measure recognition of the need for psychological help, stigma tolerance, interpersonal openness, and confident in mental health practitioners (Fischer & Turner, 1970). The response format is a 4-point Likert scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (4). The

reliability of the total scale (.86) was higher than the subscales (ranging from .62 to .74) (Fischer & Turner, 1970). Hence, as suggested by Fischer and Turner, the total score was used as the indicator of counseling help-seeking attitudes. As the present research focused on counseling help-seeking attitudes, some of the terms were revised, such as "psychiatrist" and "psychologist" were changed to "counselor"; "clinics" was changed to "counseling centers", as well as "psychiatric" and "psychotherapy" were changed to "counseling". Past research that utilized the revised terminologies such as mentioned above reported the reliability at .87, as good as the original one (Gloria, Hird, & Navarro, 2001).

The convergent validity of Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale was examined using CFA while its internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. The CFA of the initial model showed that items-11, 16, and 27 were nonsignificant items ( $p > .05$ ). Hence, these items were deleted. In addition, the parceling approach of all-item-parcel was used for the final model. Four parcels were built (Parcel 1, Need = 4R + 5 + 6R + 9R + 18 + 24R + 25 + 26R; Parcel 2, Stigma = 3R + 14R + 20R + 28; Parcel 3, Openness = 7 + 10R + 13R + 17R + 21R + 22R + 29R; Parcel 4, Confidence = 1R + 2 + 8R + 12 + 15R + 19R + 23) (Fischer & Turner, 1970). The revised model achieved convergent validity ( $AVE = .550$ ) and high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .853$ ).

#### *Data Analysis*

The hypotheses were tested using a multigroup invariance analysis with AMOS software. The multigroup invariance analysis is more sensitive in detecting the group differences compared to the traditional statistical techniques such as t-test, Analysis of Variance, or Multivariate Analysis of Variance (Hong, Malik, & Lee, 2003). The researchers followed the steps for conducting a multigroup invariance analysis as recommended by Bryne (2010). Firstly, the data were split into positive attitudes and negative attitudes groups based on the total score for counseling help-seeking attitudes. Using visual binning analysis from SPSS software, the calculated cut-off score was 64 (Pallant, 2011). There were 168 respondents (51.68%) with positive attitudes toward counseling help-seeking (scores ranging from 64 to 92), and 159 respondents (48.32%) with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking (score ranging between 32 and 63). Secondly, the models were specified based on the condition of constraint. For configural invariance model (Model 1), it was the baseline model whereby all parameters were freely estimated between groups. For metric invariance model (Model 2), the item factor loadings were constrained to be equal between groups. For scalar invariance model (Model 3), all the item factor loadings and item intercepts were constrained to be equal between groups. The latent means of the constructs were compared in a relative manner between groups. The positive attitudes group was set as a reference group with latent mean fixed to zero while the latent mean of the negative group was freely estimated.

## Results

The data was screened for gender difference by using independent samples test. Table 1 presents the results for equality of variances and means between men and women. The results of Levene's test indicated that the variances for self-high standards ( $F = 0.000, p > .05$ ), self-discrepancy ( $F = 0.748, p > .05$ ), dyadic high standards ( $F = 1.411, p > .05$ ), dyadic discrepancy ( $F = 0.857, p > .05$ ), and marital satisfaction ( $F = 1.056, p > .05$ ) are equal between men and women. The results of t-test indicated that the mean for self-high standards ( $t = 0.539, p > .05$ ), self-discrepancy ( $t = 1.675, p > .05$ ), dyadic high standards ( $t = -0.666, p > .05$ ), dyadic discrepancy ( $t = 0.952, p > .05$ ), and marital satisfaction ( $t = 1.362, p > .05$ ) are equal between men and women.

**Table 1. Independent Samples Test by Gender**

Variables	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	p	t	df	p
Self-high standards	0.000	.992	0.539	325	.590
Self-discrepancy	0.748	.388	1.675	325	.095
Dyadic high standards	1.411	.236	-0.666	325	.506
Dyadic discrepancy	0.857	.355	0.952	325	.342
Marital satisfaction	1.056	.305	1.362	325	.174

Table 2 presents the fit indices of configural, metric, and scalar invariance models. The fit indices of the configural invariance model,  $\chi^2 = 2533.249, df = 1442, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 1.757, CFI = .870, RMSEA = .048$ . For the metric invariance model, the  $\chi^2 = 2581.324, df = 1477, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 1.748, CFI = .868, RMSEA = .048$ . For the scalar invariance model, the  $\chi^2 = 2618.257, df = 1512, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 1.732, CFI = .868, RMSEA = .047$ . The three models reported good model fitness.

Metric invariance and scalar invariance are the prerequisites for testing the latent mean difference (Byrne, 2010) (Table 3). The configural model and metric invariance models were compared using the  $\chi^2$  difference value, with a nonsignificant  $\chi^2$  difference indicates that the invariance is supported. The results showed that the metric invariance was accepted ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 48.075, \Delta df = 35, p = .069$ ). It implied that the items operated in a similar manner between those with positive attitudes and those with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking. This led to the testing of the scalar invariance by comparing the metric and scalar invariance model. The results showed that the  $\chi^2$  difference between the metric and scalar invariance model was not significant and the scalar invariance was supported ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 36.933, \Delta df = 35, p = .377$ ). With the scalar invariance achieved, the latent mean difference in perfectionism and marital satisfaction between the group of positive attitudes and negative attitudes could be tested.

Table 4 presents the latent mean difference in perfectionism and marital satisfaction between positive attitudes and negative attitudes groups. As mentioned earlier, these comparisons were conducted in a relative manner. The latent mean of the perfectionism and marital satisfaction for the positive attitudes group were fixed to zero while the negative attitudes group were freely estimated. For self-high standards, the hypothesized mean difference between positive attitudes and negative attitudes groups was not supported ( $C.R. = .565, p > .05$ ). For self-discrepancy, the hypothesized mean difference

**Table 2. Fit Indices of Configural, Metric, and Scalar Invariance Models**

Model	Fit indices					
	$\chi^2$	df	p	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1: Configural Invariance	2533.249	1442	.000	1.757	.870	.048
Model 2: Metric Invariance	2581.324	1477	.000	1.748	.868	.048
Model 3: Scalar Invariance	2618.257	1512	.000	1.732	.868	.047

**Table 3. Model Comparison between Configural, Metric, and Scalar Invariance Models**

Model Comparison	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	p	Decision
Model 1 vs Model 2	48.075	35	.069	Metric Invariance supported
Model 2 vs Model 3	36.933	35	.377	Scalar invariance supported



**Table 4. Latent Mean Difference in Perfectionism and Marital Satisfaction between Positive Attitudes and Negative Attitudes toward Counseling Help-seeking Groups**

Construct	Latent Mean		S.E.	C.R.	p
	Positive Attitudes toward Counseling Help-seeking	Negative Attitudes toward Counseling Help-seeking			
Self-high standards	0	.062	.110	.565	.572
Self-discrepancy	0	.581***	.130	4.484	.000
Dyadic high standards	0	.361*	.164	2.204	.028
Dyadic discrepancy	0	.574***	.116	4.957	.000
Marital satisfaction	0	-.162*	.075	-2.149	.032

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; Latent mean of perfectionism and marital satisfaction for positive attitudes toward counseling help-seeking group was fixed at 0.

between positive attitudes and negative attitudes groups was supported (C.R. = 4.484,  $p < .001$ ). For those with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking, their latent mean of self-discrepancy is significantly higher than those with positive attitudes. This result indicated that they were more critical of themselves compared to those with positive attitudes.

As for the dyadic high standards, the hypothesized mean difference between positive attitudes and negative attitudes groups was supported (C.R. = 2.204,  $p < .05$ ). For those with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking, their latent mean of the dyadic high standards was significantly greater than those with positive attitudes. This indicated that they set higher standards on their spouses compared to those with positive attitudes. For dyadic discrepancy, the hypothesized mean difference between positive attitudes and negative attitudes groups was supported (C.R. = 4.957,  $p < .001$ ). For those with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking, their latent mean of the dyadic discrepancy was significantly higher than those with positive attitudes. This suggested that they are more critical to their spouse compared to those with positive attitudes.

For marital satisfaction, the hypothesized mean difference between positive attitudes and negative attitudes groups was supported (C.R. = -2.149,  $p < .05$ ). For those with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking, their latent mean of marital satisfaction was significantly lower than those with positive attitudes. This result indicated that they were less satisfied in marriage compared to those with positive attitudes.

### Discussions

The results indicated that there were significant mean differences in perfectionism and marital satisfaction between the groups of positive and negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking. For those with negative counseling help-seeking attitude, they are more perfectionistic than those with positive attitudes toward counseling help-seeking attitudes. They are more likely

to criticize themselves for not achieving the standards, which are usually unrealistically high. In addition, they set high standards for their spouse, and they are critical toward their spouse as well. The situation becomes more worrisome as they also experienced lower marital satisfaction. The present research expanded the theory of planned behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). The theory highlighted the role of counseling help-seeking attitudes in the help-seeking process, whereby the intention of help-seeking is determined by the help-seeking attitudes (Ajzen, 1991). There are different characteristics between those with positive and negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking. Those who have negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking are more vulnerable as they exhibit more perfectionistic characteristics and experience a less satisfying marriage.

Counselors are urged to be mindful of the service gap; those who are in need, but are less likely to reach out for help. Thus, alternatives need to be sought to reach out to those with negative attitudes toward counseling help-seeking. Self-help measures such as web-based information and treatment strategies could be helpful to this group. The information could be published on the World Wide Web and smartphone applications. Also, self-help books on perfectionism such as *Overcoming Perfectionism* (Shafran, Egan, & Wade, 2010) and *When Perfect isn't Good Enough* (Antony & Swinson, 2009) could potentially be excellent tools for the graduate students in learning to overcome their life obstacles. These mediums may serve as an alternative ground for help-seeking to those are reluctant to commit to face-to-face sessions. They could remain anonymous and assess relevant information at their convenience.

In addition, self-administered and self-interpreted inventory could act as a stepping stone that may lead to actual help-seeking. For example, Couple Checkup is an online tool that enables couples to assess the strength and growth area of their relationship. The couples complete the inventory, and a report would be generated. Thus, the couples can start a meaningful discussion among themselves or engage with professional services when they are ready. Moreover, some people may

feel uncomfortable with face-to-face interaction with counselors. Alternative modes of counseling such as mail counseling or telecounseling could be considered as anonymity is guaranteed in the counseling process. Lastly, creative approaches such as psychodrama, arts, dance movement, and music therapies may sound friendlier than the conventional face-to-face counseling session.

The present study utilized self-report data which highly rely on the respondents' honesty and perception. No individual identification would be released in the report, and the data was analyzed as a group for ensuring anonymity. Also, the respondents were from a university in Malaysia, limiting its generalization of the findings to those in different locality. Of a closer look into the respondents' socioeconomic status, the respondents were from relatively high-income group with 40% of the respondents reported a monthly income of more than MYR 10,000. Hence, the findings generalization to those with lower socioeconomic status needs to be made with caution. Lastly, all the respondents were Malaysian, hence, the findings may be different for the international students who were pursuing graduate education in Malaysia.

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