



Research Paper: Socio-political Perfectionism: A Cross-cultural Study



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Abstract

The present study, as interdisciplinary research between sociology and psychology, aimed to construct a scale for socio-political perfectionism and to compare perfectionism among the 18 to 35-year-old Iranian students living in Iran (155 participants) and those residing in Germany and Canada (105 participants). Regarding this, the sample (360 people) was selected through convenience sampling; the data were also collected online using Google Drive. Additionally, positive and negative perfectionism scale and attitude measurement questions about the severity of social issues, as well as the scale of socio-political perfectionism, were used as the instruments. The scale related to socio-political perfectionism was obtained through using the factor analysis, with a 12-item factor, applied in the present study for the first time. The validity and reliability of the scale were also determined as optimum. The results were explained by psychological and sociological researches and through applying theories by representing the effectiveness of cultural differences in the socio-political perfectionism.

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1. Introduction

Researchers are still interested in perfectionism field after the decades of scientific study in this regard. According to [Hewitt and Flett \(1991\)](#), possessing unrealistic standards, as well as the motivations of perfectionism are its important characteristics. Perfectionist standards could lead to positive and negative consequences ([Smith et al., 2016](#)). The study of [Curran and Hill \(2019\)](#) show that there is evidence that perfectionism is on the rise; studies investigating perfectionism compiled between 1986 and 2015 clearly demonstrate that young people are more likely to be perfectionists than their predecessors ([Livazović & Kuzmanović, 2022](#)).

Until now, various perfectionism scales have been constructed, which can be generally categorized into perfectionism dimensions and fields. For example, its dimensions include two ([Terry-Short et al., 1995](#)), three ([Hewitt & Flett, 1991](#)), six ([Frost et al., 1990](#)), and eight ([Hill et al., 2016](#)), and fields are sports ([Dunn et al., 2006](#)), religion ([Besharat, 2019](#)), physical appearance ([Yang & Stoeber, 2012](#)), educational ([Malik & Ghayas, 2016](#)), and alike. Obviously, some perfectionists get high score in one or more fields, while they obtain average or even low score in some others. Thus there are some fields such as socio-political perfectionism, which have been highlighted insufficiently. Based on socially-prescribed perfectionism subscale provided by [Hewitt and Flett \(1991\)](#), an individual believes that others expect him or her to be perfect, while the perfectionistic expectations of an individual from society and social structures is considered as socio-political perfectionism in the present study.

[Curran and Hill \(2019\)](#) mention that the correlations and consequences of perfectionism are evaluated well, while its formation and growth is less highlighted by researchers. In addition, most of the conducted studies have focused on individual factors, especially initial family environment and parental performance and no research has assessed cultural changes, as well as the effect of perfectionism levels over the time ([Curran & Hill, 2019](#)). Further, they argue that their study has been the first research in this regard and it is considered as the model of mutual constitution ([Markus & Kitayama, 2010](#)) as its theoretical basis for the possibility of the cultural changes affecting perfectionism. According to [Markus and Kitayama \(2010\)](#), the cultural values dominating society are reflected in the norms of civic and social institutions such as family, educational, religious, economic, and political institutions all the times, and the institutions shape the attitudes, values, beliefs, and personality of the individuals.

Studies in Western cultures have shown that perfectionism is conceptualized by two-factor higher-order model including perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. However, little is known about the construct of perfectionism in Eastern societies. Thus [Moloodi et al. \(2021\)](#) examine the two-factor higher-order model of perfectionism in Iranian general and clinical samples. The two-factor higher-order model of perfectionism presents adequate fit with data for females from the general population and clinical sample. Data for males are only available from the general population, and the model illustrates adequate fit with the data first after removing the Rumination scale of the perfectionistic concerns. The

perfectionistic strivings dimension shows no or negative association with depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, but perfectionistic concerns dimension demonstrates positive correlation with these indices in all the participants for both males and females (Moloodi et al., 2021).

The present study is theoretically based on the opinion of Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2010), along with citing some sociological theories related to idealism.

The word *perfectionism* is less used in sociological literature and the closest concept to it in the social sciences is idealism. There are many common boundaries between the sociological theories relating to idealism and perfectionism, despite their differences. However, some researchers including Arneson (2000) and Wall (1998) apply perfectionism in the texts of social sciences such as philosophy and sociology.

The main source of idealism in social sciences is derived from Plato who believed in the existence of material world from the unreal shadows of ideas behind them (as cited in Harris M. & Creek, 1999). Plato believed that human is social and socialized, while his/her life, governments, and nature are the facts placed in a cave and world of forms contains their truth. Accordingly, he tried to create a utopia under the leadership of a philosopher, which was named as philosopher world (Popper, 1963).

Unlike realists, idealists fail to communicate fact credibly and positively for a long time, some of which even deny reality definitively. The priority of the mind over object is axial proposition in this regard. In fact, how the mind of recognizer

identifies the world of nature or human-made political and social institutions is considered as the center of this philosophy, in which mind is prioritized over objective as already mentioned. In other words, mind can recognize external world and even predict and explain the future behavior of humans (Uebersax, 2013). Kant, one of the main experts in idealistic thoughts, based his political philosophy on the philosophy of ethics. Considering the nature of the government as ethical as well as his prescribed method regarding government issues and requirements are originated from his ethical foundation of affairs.

In politics, idealism is defined as confabulation and idealist beliefs that politics should be a function of the ultimate end of human aspirations and ideals. Additionally, it is based on the hypothesis derived from the 18th century enlightenment tradition upon which environmental conditions shape human behavior, their variation can be a basis for changing the behavior, and human being can achieve perfection or possesses at least improvement and progress of talent. Reforming human always is possible in the framework of the insight and idealism which is fundamentally based on the possibility of adapting politics and ethical standards (Allison, 2004).

Along with all available sociological theories with idealistic perspective which are basically rooted in Greek philosopher's expressions, Popper (1963), an Austrian-British philosopher, wrote a book entitled *The open society and its enemies* in which several main philosophers in the history such as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx are criticized and introduced as the founders of a closed society. In addition, he

(1963) believes that they lead to solidity and hallucinating society members by presenting some examples of utopia.

The idea of socio-political perfectionism was arisen since some individuals in Iranian society were not satisfied with small and gradual changes at all and wanted rapid and significant variations constantly. The political attitudes of these individuals were different and even contradictory, which resulted in doubling the problems. The present social-psychology study, as an interdisciplinary research between sociology and psychology, sought to construct and validate a scale for socio-political perfectionism and compare perfectionism between the Iranian students residing in Iran, as well as those living in the West.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

The population included 18-35-year-old Iranian students residing in Iran, Germany, and Canada. In addition, the sample consisted of 360 individuals (67% women and 33% men) which were selected by using convenience sampling and divided into residents in Iran (150), Germany (50), and Canada (55). Due to the insignificant difference between the mean and standard deviation (Levene's test) of variables in Germany and Canada groups, they were merged and 105 students living in Germany and Canada were considered as a group residing in the West. Further, the link related to the questionnaires designed in Google Drive was placed in the virtual social networks of students, along with the explanation of their general objective, and those having inclusion criteria were invited to complete the questionnaire. The data

were collected during the peak of coronavirus outbreak in April 2020 and analyzed using SPSS 15. The research ethical code of the study complies with EE/99, 3, 02, 13299.

2.2 Instrument

The scale of socio-political perfectionism, as well as positive and negative perfectionism scale (Terry-Short et al., 1995) and an Attitude Measurement Question regarding the severity of social issues in the society of their residence were applied as the instruments in the present study.

Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale consists of 40 items and possesses desirable validity and reliability in Iranian society. Besharat (2005) conducted an investigation of the relationship between perfectionism and self-esteem in pre-college students among 212 Iranian students in 2003 and reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale as 0.90 and 0.78, respectively. Additionally, he determined the correlation of individuals' scores as 0.86 based on the re-test with four-week time interval, by representing the appropriate reliability of the scale. Further, scale validity was obtained as desirable by calculating the correlation coefficient between the micro-scales of the test and those of General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) and Cooper Smith's Self-esteem Inventory (SEI) (Besharat, 2005).

2.2.1 Socio-political perfectionism scale

For the first time, his scale was used in the present study and its psychometric features were computed. In addition, exploratory factor analysis with principle component method was adopted to evaluate its validity. Regarding the scale, 17 initial items were

prepared based on the perfectionism characteristics and available perfectionism scales generalized to social issues. For example, one of the items in perfectionism scale (Hill et al., 2016) as "I believed that everything should be placed in its place" was generalized as "I believed that everything should exactly be in its place in the society". Further, some items were created from political and social structures by considering the possession of the standards related to perfectionism.

Furthermore, the content of the items is based on the hypothesis that some individuals expect excellence and perfection in the field of socio-political issues as they insist on achieving strict standards and all-or-none thinking in the personal aspects of their life. As shown in table 1, the initial scale is presented to the participants, and the data were collected and analyzed through factor analysis with principle component method.

Table 1

Factor loading of the items related to socio-political perfectionism

Items in the order of larger factor loading	Factor loading
11. I believed that everything should exactly be in its place in the society.	0.74
10. The country should be administered by completely specialized and perfect individuals.	0.72
15. I feel satisfaction only with implementing justice in the society completely.	0.69
18. I feel satisfied with the society when all officials are trustworthy.	0.64
12. Law and order should exactly be enforced in the society.	0.63
4. The society should reform in all aspects.	0.60
17. I feel satisfaction with the society when all individuals are trustworthy.	0.58
3. The disorder and lawlessness in the society annoy me severely.	0.55
7. I am not satisfied with anything less than a healthy and ideal society.	0.52
14. All offenders should be dealt with completely based on the law.	0.52
5. I feel satisfaction only when fundamental changes occur in a relatively small period.	0.52
16. The society is desirable only when everything can be fully predicted and future can be accurately Planned.	0.46
2. I think a small or moderate improvement in social problems is useless.	0.31
6. I think no difference is observed if social situation gets worse than the current one.	0.27
13. I think gradual positive changes in the society are the best occurrence.	-0.20
8. I think we will never reach a desired society.	0.16
9. Respecting social ethics and law by me and other individuals plays no role in reforming society.	0.14
Eigenvalue	4.64
Explained variance percentage	27.32

Table 1 summarized the factor loading of items, by indicating the maximum factor loading in the following items "I believed that everything should exactly be in its place in the society", "The country should be administered by completely specialized and perfect individuals", and "I feel satisfaction only with implementing justice in the society completely ", respectively. Considering 12 items having factor loading above 0.40, the minimum was obtained as 0.46 in "The society is desirable only when everything can be fully predicted and future can be accurately planned".

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test were respectively determined as 0.84 and 1379.99, which were significant at $p < 0.001$. According to the researcher, one-factor state was obtained as the best, while more than one factor was suggested based on the Scree plot. In fact, one-factor state was the most appropriate one in the present study although attaining political and social factors were expected. Since 0.40 was considered as the minimum factor loading accepted for items, five items were eliminated among 17 ones entered into analysis, and finally a 12-item scale was considered.

In addition, the correlation between socio-political perfectionism as well as positive perfectionism and negative one were determined as 0.44 and 0.16, respectively ($p < 0.001$). In other words, the individuals with more positive perfectionism possess higher socio-political perfectionism. Further, scale validity can be considered as moderate in spite of failing to achieve high correlation coefficient, especially with negative

perfectionism. Moreover, the reliability of 12-item scale for socio-political perfectionism was calculated using Cronbach's alpha (0.83).

2.2.2 Attitude measurement question about the severity of social issues

An attitude measurement question was designed regarding the severity of social issues in the society where they live (Iran, Canada, and Germany) as "How the current situation of the society (the country of residence) is with respect to the severity of social problems in your opinion"? The question included five choices (0, 25, 50, 75, and 100) upon which higher scores represent the higher severity of problems. Based on the pilot assessment, individuals understood the objective of the question completely and its face validity was confirmed by three experts in the psychology and social sciences.

3. Results

Based on **Table 2**, no difference is observed between individual perfectionism (positive and negative) among the Iranian students living in Iran and those residing in the West, while their socio-political perfectionism, as well as attitude toward the severity of social issues is different. Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test for distributing data was conducted on three variables, which represents the normality of positive ($p = 0.08$) and negative perfectionism ($p = 0.20$) and the lack of normality in socio-political one ($p < 0.05$). Thus Mann-Whitney U test (nonparametric) was applied along with the multivariable analysis of variance (MANOVA) (**Table 2**), leading to similar results.

Table 2

Comparing the mean of Positive, Negative, and Socio-political perfectionism among the Iranian students residing in Iran and those living in Germany and Canada

Scale	Iran		Germany and Canada		F	Sig.	Eta	Power
	M	SD	M	SD				
Positive perfectionism	81.30	10.96	80.47	10.31	0.75	0.387	0.003	0.14
Negative perfectionism	62.45	11.17	61.11	12.66	0.72	0.396	0.003	0.14
Socio-political perfectionism	48.67	6.74	4.49	6.5	82.78	0.0001	0.26	1

According to [Table 2](#), MANOVA indicated a significant difference between two groups. Pillai's trace, Wilks Lambda, Hotelling's trace, and Roy's largest root were significant at $p < 0.001$. The results also presented a significant difference which was observed between socio-political perfectionism ($p < 0.0001$) among two groups ([Table 2](#)). Meanwhile, their positive perfectionism ($p = 0.38$), as well as negative one ($p = 0.39$) were not significantly different. In other words, no difference was seen between the positive and negative perfectionism (individual)

related to Iranian students residing in Iran and those in the West. Nevertheless, there was a significant difference between their perfectionism in the field of socio-political issues in their country of residence. Those living in Iran achieved a higher socio-political perfectionism.

[Table 3](#) illustrates the results of attitudes toward severity of social problems. How is the current situation of the society (their country of residence) with respect to the severity of social problems in your opinion"? (Give a score between 0 to 100)

Table 3

Percentage of the severity of social problems according to the Iranian students living in Iran, Germany, and Canada

Severity of social problems (higher scores indicate more severe problems)	Iran	Germany and Canada
	%	%
0	1.9	8.2
25	1.9	61.2
50	20	20
75	52.3	10.6
100	23.9	0
Total	100	100

The students residing in Iran believed that the severity of social problems was significantly high ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2 = 135$) ([Table](#)

[3](#)). Comparing the frequency of distribution of the number of students in two groups demonstrated that the severity of problems

was significantly perceived more in Iran. It is worth noting that social problems were described in the explanation provided in the questionnaire description as bribe, embezzlement, fraud, shirk, overcharge, hoarding, ethnic discrimination, severe ethnic prejudice, weak work ethic, law escaping, falsity, and favoritism, as well as lacking meritocracy and traffic regulation observance, and the like.

4. Discussion

In the psychological texts, experimental studies explained the concept *self* in the form of a cultural product during the recent decades (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). The presence of numerous behavioral differences in various cultures and structures reflect that intellectual, emotional, and behavioral patterns are affected by cultural, social, and political structures, instead of being a mere psychological flow (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

Based on the results of the present study, the students living in Iran experienced higher socio-political perfectionism compared to those residing in Germany and Canada, which can be discussed according to different perspectives. In addition, the present study underlined that existing and dominating the attitude of perfectionism in the general structure of a society can create perfectionist characters with different individual, political, and social attitudes, and vice versa. For example, putting emphasis on the role of the government as a powerful ethical and fully-fledged responsible institution in creating a utopia has been considered as the most important political principles of idealism school based on the philosophical perspectives of Kant

and his followers (Allison, 2004). Accordingly, the main question raised is that whether socio-political perfectionism in the individuals belonging to the societies where government becomes a strong force such as Iran is highlighted or not? In fact, actor's behavior and structure undergo a reciprocating cycle in such society. In the society in which government as an ethical institution expects ideal performance from actors and leads them to have idealistic characters constantly, individuals equally demand ideal social and political expectations from the government with an idealistic perspective. It seems that the structure is a general mirror and actor's behavior as well as its reflection. Considering the mutual constitution model, individuals and socio-cultural structures are the complement and reflector of each other, not separated. That is to say, the individuals are shaped by the structure of their society form their structures in a dynamic and reciprocal cycle (Shweder, 2003).

According to Curran and Hill (2017), revising the model provided by Hewitt et al. (2017) could lead to a result upon which the features such as socio-economic changes, competition, and materialism, as well as the variation in the meaning of identity and self, improvement in the value of individualism, and an increase in the importance of comparing socio-economic bases result in increasing individual's tendency to reconstruct his identity under the banner of the culture. As expected, self-oriented perfectionism in the societies emphasizing competition, individualism, and meritocracy is compared to the other dimensions of perfectionism such as socially prescribed and other-oriented more (Sherry et al., 2015). Although the study of Moloodi et al. (2021) indicated that there

were similarities and differences between the perfectionism of Western societies and Iran, it seemed that this difference was small in individual dimensions and larger in socio-political dimensions.

Furthermore, the result of the study represented a significant higher severity of problems according to the students' resident in Iran. In other words, a larger number of the students in Iran expressed social problems more compared to those residing in the West, the analysis of which requires to understand the meaning of anomie as the root of the most social abnormalities, problems, and harms. The word anomie is known by Durkheim in the social sciences literature, which is described as a social condition in which the norms generalized and accepted by the society become weak or inefficient, leading to social crisis and disintegration. The incidence of social problems and harms could be unavoidable under these conditions (Coser & Rosenberg, 1969). Merton (1968) believed that anomie condition would occur since cultural value system determines the objectives of success for all individuals in the society, while the social organization and class structure of the society fail to provide accessibility to the objective for all. Additionally, the gap caused by putting emphasis on the goals of monetary success and material prosperity extensively resulted in considering the technical and social instrument designed to obtain desirable results as the main concern. Then, materialists emerge from within an idealistic orientation paradoxically. Under the conditions, the individuals with more limited access to the legal instruments for achieving objectives moved toward the nonconformity methods of individual adaptation. In this regard,

Merton (1968) recognized conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion which referred to individual attempt to get rid of the governing standards and build a new social order as the five methods selected by society members under social anomie condition. The lack of the predictability of behavior, as well as belief in mysticism and luck was considered as the other consequence of anomie condition according to Merton (1968 as cited in Seeman, 1959). Many examples are available in the current society of Iran, which are consistent with Merton theory (Faizollahi et al., 2018; Rafipoor, 2008).

The result could be justified by stress and chronic stressors in psychology, along with its sociological explanations. The presence of severe and chronic stressors leading to pathological reactions (Craiovan, 2014; Wu et al., 2020). Thus decrease in the tolerance and patience leading in gradual changes in society members especially youths was expected. Based on the studies regarding the relationship between stress and perfectionism, stress was the consequence of perfectionism, while its opposite as chronic stress exacerbated perfectionism at least in some fields, which seems it has not been assessed so far.

Moreover, the criticism of Popper on Plato's idealistic theory and effect of idealistic attitude on forming a defective social structure and designing *social engineering* perspective are to be mentioned. Social engineering believes that human possesses sovereign on his/ her destiny, and can affect or change human history based on his objectives. However, Popper (1963) mentioned that ambition was the fundamental feature of Plato's perfect

regime, and Plato did his best to reconstruct ancient aristocratic systems and developed idealism. Further, Popper (1963) named Plato's plan on politics as *nowhere* engineering in which moving individual harmoniously without contradiction toward objective led to his more reasonable operation, which was in opposition to the social engineering called as reasonable method (piecemeal engineering) by Popper. Regarding Popper's piecemeal engineering, politician knew that perfectionism was far away if it was achievable fundamentally, and the regular struggle against affliction, injustices and war was more likely to be approved and supported by a large number of individuals rather than the struggle for achieving an ideal. Consequently, it is hoped that applying piecemeal method can result in overcoming the biggest practical problem in each type of reasonable political reform, resorting reason instead of violating and following emotions, and actualizing democratic methods. In addition, Popper (1963) pointed out that aestheticism and radicalism inevitably led us to leave reason and believe in a replacement with hoping for political miracles, and turn the earth into hell for human unlike which was expected.

The present study focused on the negative aspects of socio-political perfectionism and further research can respond to the question that whether socio-political perfectionism possessed positive and negative dimension similar to the individual one.

5. Conclusion

Finally, the following results were obtained in the present study. The developed scale for socio-political perfectionism was considered as an appropriate instrument for measuring the construct. In addition, the socio-political perfectionism related to the

students residing in Iran was more similar to those living in Germany and Canada, while no difference was observed in their individual (positive and negative) perfectionism. Further, the individuals residing in Iran reported a significantly greater severity of social problems compared to those residing in the West. In other words, the gap between current situation and expectations in Iran was higher than that of West.

In general, the limitations of the study included relatively small sample size, convenience sampling and young sample. Finally, replicating the study in different cultures and evaluating the relationship between the construct and other variables such as demographic ones are suggested by the study.

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Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any organization. Also, this research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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