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# Age, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status Differences in Explicit and Implicit Beliefs About Effortlessly Perfect Self-Presentation

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# Age, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status Differences in Explicit and Implicit Beliefs About Effortlessly Perfect Self-Presentation

## **Abstract**

Feeling pressure to project an image of effortless perfection -- always appearing to perform with self-confidence and ease --- has been portrayed in the media as an increasingly common mental health vulnerability with potentially serious implications for college women. Despite this, almost no empirical research exists on effortlessly perfect self-presentation (EPSP) or demographic differences in it.

- Some recent research suggests that perfectionism is on the rise among young people (Curran & Hill, 2017), and that it is more associated with mental health problems among students with high rather than low socioeconomic status (Lyman & Luthar, 2014). However, these studies did not focus specifically on EPSP, which differs from more typical perfectionism in that it prohibits apparent effort or anxiety while striving for perfection. Of the two published studies on EPSP, one did not examine demographic differences (Flett et al., 2016) and the other found higher endorsement of EPSP among men than among women (Travers et al., 2016).
- Anonymous interviews we conducted about EPSP in 40 college students (Glazer et al., in prep) yielded very complex, self-contradictory responses suggesting that beliefs about EPSP may be characterized by stigma and ambivalence. For this reason we decided to focus the current study on indirect and implicit measures of EPSP.
- In this study, participants completed three new scales about EPSP, along with the two existing measures of this phenomenon, several mental health measures, and demographics questions. They also rated the perceived social status and self-esteem of two target individuals in a within-person experimental design.

## **Keywords**

age, gender, socioeconomic status, self presentation, perfectionism

## **Disciplines**

Applied Behavior Analysis | Psychology | Social Psychology

## **Comments**

This poster was presented at the annual convention of the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, Washington DC, April 5-8, 2018.

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# Age, gender, and socioeconomic status differences in effortlessly perfect self-presentation

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## Introduction

Feeling pressure to project an image of effortless perfection -- always appearing to perform with self-confidence and ease --- has been portrayed in the media as an increasingly common mental health vulnerability with potentially serious implications for college women. Despite this, almost no empirical research exists on **effortlessly perfect self-presentation (EPSP)** or demographic differences in it.

- Some recent research suggests that perfectionism is on the rise among young people (Curran & Hill, 2017), and that it is more associated with mental health problems among students with high rather than low socioeconomic status (Lyman & Luthar, 2014). However, these studies did not focus specifically on EPSP, which differs from more typical perfectionism in that it prohibits apparent effort or anxiety while striving for perfection. Of the two published studies on EPSP, one did not examine demographic differences (Flett et al., 2016) and the other found higher endorsement of EPSP among men than among women (Travers et al., 2016).
- Anonymous interviews we conducted about EPSP in 40 college students (Glazer et al., *in prep*) yielded very complex, self-contradictory responses suggesting that beliefs about EPSP may be characterized by stigma and ambivalence. For this reason we decided to focus the current study on indirect and implicit measures of EPSP.
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## Method

### Participants

500 U.S. residents (283 men and 217 women) completed our study on the internet for payment via Mechanical Turk. They were 20-77 years old,  $M (SD) = 36.17 (11.32)$ , and 77% identified as White.

### Materials

#### New scales assessing beliefs about EPSP

- Personal beliefs** (7 items, alpha = .92)  
e.g., "If you don't look confident doing something, you shouldn't do it at all"
- Perceived societal beliefs** (7 items alpha = .90)  
e.g., "Most people will only respect you if you look confident"
- Pressure** (7 items, alpha = .94)  
e.g., "I have been feeling pressure to appear confident, even when I am not"

#### EPSP scales in the previous literature

- Hiding effort (4 items, alpha = .92; Flett et al., 2016)  
e.g., "I want to seem or look perfect without others finding out about my struggles to achieve it."
- Effortless perfection (10 items alpha = .93; Travers et al., 2016)  
e.g., "It is best not to show how much effort one puts into his/her work."

#### Measures of mental health and wellbeing

- Depression (BSI; Derogatis, 1993)
- Anxiety (BSI; Derogatis, 1993)
- Narcissistic vulnerability (B-PNI; Schoenleber et al., 2015)
- Self-esteem (HEXACO-60; Ashton & Lee, 2009)
- Self-compassion (SCS – SF, Raes et al., 2011)
- Fixed/entity mindset (MI; Dweck, 2012)

#### Demographics questions

- Age, gender, socioeconomic status (operationalized as parental education level)

## Experimental assessment of implicit beliefs about EPSP

Participants read descriptions of two target individuals in a random order. Each target was said to be of the same gender and age as the participant.

**Effortlessly perfect target description:**  
X is presenting a major project to a lot of people and really wants to do well. X's heart is pounding with anxiety, but the audience can't tell that he/she is nervous. The audience finds his/her ideas very impressive.

**Visibly anxious target description:**  
X is presenting a major project to a lot of people and really wants to do well. X's heart is pounding with anxiety, and the audience can tell that he/she is nervous. The audience finds his/her ideas very impressive.

After reading each description participants rated their impressions of the target on a 6-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*

- Perceived target social status** (Berenson et al., 2017) alpha = .84  
e.g., "X. is likely to have career success" "X is popular and admired by people who meet him/her"
- Perceived target self-esteem** (HEXACO-60; Ashton & Lee, 2009) alpha = .73  
e.g., "X feels reasonably satisfied with himself/herself overall"

Difference scores (effortlessly perfect target -visibly anxious target) indexed implicit beliefs about the benefits of appearing effortlessly perfect rather than visibly anxious.

## Results

### Correlations among EPSP scales

#### Partial correlations controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status

	1. Personal beliefs	2. Perceived societal beliefs	3. Pressure	4. Hiding effort
1. Personal beliefs about EPSP	-			
2. Perceived societal beliefs about EPSP	.74***	-		
3. Pressure for EPSP	.53***	.58***	-	
4. Hiding effort (Flett et al., 2016)	.65***	.61***	.62***	-
5. Effortless perfection (Travers et al., 2016)	.74***	.66***	.69***	.73***

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

### Associations between implicit and explicit EPSP measures

#### Associations between implicit benefits of EPSP and questionnaire measures of EPSP controlling for age, gender, socioeconomic status, and anxiety

	Implicit benefits of EPSP (vs. visible anxiety)	
	Social status benefits	Self-esteem benefits
Personal beliefs about EPSP	.09 *	.04
Perceived societal beliefs about EPSP	.18 ***	.07
Pressure for EPSP	.10 *	.11 *
Hiding effort (Flett et al., 2016)	.07	.05
Effortless perfection (Travers et al., 2016)	.06	.03

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

#### Associations between implicit benefits of EPSP and new EPSP scales, controlling for previous EPSP scales, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and anxiety

	Implicit benefits of EPSP (vs. visible anxiety)	
	Social status benefits	Self-esteem benefits
Personal beliefs about EPSP	.05	.01
Perceived societal beliefs about EPSP	.17 ***	.06
Pressure for EPSP	.07	.11 *

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Associations of EPSP with mental health and wellbeing

### Partial correlations controlling for age, gender, and socioeconomic status

	Depression symptoms	Anxiety symptoms	Narcissistic vulnerability	Self-esteem	Self-compassion	Fixed mindset
Personal beliefs about EPSP	.40***	.45***	.55***	-.26***	-.16***	.47***
Perceived societal beliefs about EPSP	.38***	.37***	.55***	-.34***	-.29***	.44***
Pressure for EPSP	.49***	.50***	.66***	-.45***	-.40***	.34***
Hiding effort (Flett et al.)	.40***	.39***	.62***	-.33***	-.31***	.39***
Effortless perfection (Travers et al.)	.48***	.50***	.70***	-.33***	-.25***	.49***

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

### Partial correlations controlling for previous EPSP scales (hiding effort and effortless perfection) as well as age, gender, and socioeconomic status

	Depression symptoms	Anxiety symptoms	Narcissistic vulnerability	Self-esteem	Self-compassion	Fixed mindset
Personal beliefs about EPSP	.05	.12***	.01	.01	.09	.16***
Perceived societal beliefs about EPSP	.08	.05	.10*	-.14**	-.13**	.16***
Pressure for EPSP	.24***	.24***	.30***	-.30***	-.29***	-.01

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Demographic differences in EPSP

### Partial correlations of EPSP scales with each demographic factor, controlling for the other two demographic factors

	Age	Gender (woman)	Socioeconomic status
Personal beliefs about EPSP	-.13**	-.05	.07
Perceived societal beliefs about EPSP	-.10*	.08	.07
Pressure for EPSP	-.26***	.11*	.09*
Hiding effort (Flett et al., 2016)	-.09*	.01	.10*
Effortless perfection (Travers et al., 2016)	-.22***	-.06	.09*

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Discussion

- Our new EPSP scales explain differences in implicit beliefs about the benefits of EPSP and differences in mental health above and beyond the previously existing scales.
- Scales assessing perceptions of societal beliefs and pressures may capture EPSP particularly well, because people may be more willing and able to honestly endorse these than to endorse statements regarding their own EPSP.
- The scale by Travers and colleagues is actually comprised of a mix of personal EPSP and perceived societal EPSP items.
- All measures of effortlessly perfect self-presentation were inversely associated with age.
- Although there were no significant gender differences in personal beliefs about EPSP, perceived societal beliefs, or the two pre-existing measures, women reported significantly higher levels of pressure to be effortlessly perfect than men.
- Socioeconomic status was positively associated with pressure to be effortlessly perfect.
- Our research suggests that EPSP is indeed a mental health vulnerability for young people, and especially for young women of higher socioeconomic status.