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Research Article

Neurobiology of Perfectionism

Fabiano de Abreu Agrela Rodrigues[1,*], Flávio Henrique dos Santos Nascimento[2]

[1] Center for Research and Analysis Heraclitus (CPAH), Department of Neuroscience and Genomics, Brazil
* **Corresponding Author Email:** contato@cpah.com.br- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-5487-5852

[2] Heraclito Research and Analysis Center (CPAH), Department of Neuroscience and Genomics , Brazil
Email: contato@cpah.com.br - **ORCID:** 0009-0007-3760-2936

Abstract: This study aims to understand the neurobiology of perfectionism within the framework of cognitive neuroscience, focusing on mental disorders, as part of the program developed by CPAH - Center for Research and Analyses Heráclito. The research focuses on analyzing the brain function of perfectionists, using gifted individuals as a reference due to their higher tendency towards perfectionism. The study also includes individuals with high abilities, disorders such as Avoidant Personality Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), as well as anxiety disorders, depression, and mood disorders. Factors such as childhood criticism, high expectations, and competitive environments are also considered.
The research is based on neuroimaging studies that highlight the importance of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex in executive control and error correction, elements directly linked to perfectionist behavior. Additionally, dopamine and its influence on the reward system, along with the role of the amygdala in emotional processing, are crucial factors in how perfectionists deal with success and failure.

Keywords: Perfectionism, neurobiology, gifted individuals, anxiety disorders, dopamine, anterior cingulate cortex.

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1. Introduction

The study of the neurobiology of perfectionism has been gaining relevance in the field of cognitive neuroscience , especially in the context of **mental** disorders . This work, developed by **CPAH -** Heraclito Research and Analysis Center , seeks to investigate how different brain regions and neurotransmitters are involved in perfectionist behavior. Based on neuroimaging studies, the main focus is on understanding how the **anterior cingulate cortex (ACC)** and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex **(DLPFC)** contribute to executive control, error correction and self - criticism, which are central traits of perfectionism . Furthermore , the work considers how the balance between neurotransmitters such as dopamine , glutamate and GABA can influence cognitive rigidity and the pursuit of high standards , characteristics that manifest themselves in both adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism .
The study also delves into the analysis of gifted individuals , who tend to have a higher prevalence of perfectionist traits . Other profiles covered include disorders such as Avoidant Personality Disorder , OCD , OCPD , Anxiety Disorders , depression and eating disorders , which often co - occur with perfectionism. The research also explores the influence of environmental factors, such as childhood criticism and high social expectations , and how these external influences interact with neurobiological predispositions to amplify perfectionist behavior.

2. Development

Among the brain regions related to perfectionism, the anterior cingulate cortex **(ACC) is** considered the most important subregion . The ACC is essential for error detection , performance monitoring, and response to failures,

functions that are central to perfectionist behavior. Studies indicate that perfectionist individuals show more intense activation of this area when they encounter errors or when their high expectations are not met , which reinforces self - criticism and corrective behavior [1,2].
Below is the order of the brain regions most related to perfectionism, according to the neuroscientific literature :

1. Cortex (ACC) : Related to error detection and conflict monitoring, this region is crucial for self-correction and self criticism , being the most important **in** the perfectionism circuit [3].
Recent studies investigating the relationship between brain structure and IQ indicate that the anterior cingulate cortex **(ACC)** plays a central role in executive functions and error correction in individuals with high IQ. This brain region is involved in monitoring performance and adapting strategies in the face of failure, characteristics that are frequently observed in people with perfectionist traits , especially among those with high intelligence [4,5]. Individuals with higher IQs tend to have an increase in the volume of gray matter in the ACC, which facilitates error detection and complex decision-making . This ACC hyperactivity is reflected in greater personal demands and perfectionist behavior, which can be attributed to the constant search for ideal performance and constant self -correction [6,7].

The prefrontal cortex , together with the ACC, also contributes to executive control and critical evaluation , intensifying perfectionist traits in individuals with high IQs. The use of neuroimaging techniques , such as Voxel-Based Morphometry **(VMB)** , has demonstrated significant correlations between ACC volume and performance on IQ tests, reinforcing the link between advanced cognitive abilities and perfectionism [4].
Neurotransmitters play a crucial role in the functioning of the anterior cingulate cortex **(ACC) ,** a key region for error detection , conflict monitoring, and strategy correction . Dopamine is one of the main neurotransmitters involved in the ACC, being essential for executive control, which affects decision-making ability and response to errors. Studies indicate that dopamine influences motivation and reward seeking, which may be related to perfectionist behavior, since perfectionists constantly seek optimal performance [3]. Furthermore , glutamate and GABA are also involved in the excitatory and inhibitory balance of the ACC , regulating cognitive flexibility and the ability to adapt to new challenges. Dysfunction or imbalance in these neurotransmitters can lead to exacerbation of self -criticism and cognitive rigidity , often observed in people with high perfectionist traits [4].
Maladaptive perfectionism is generally related to a dopaminergic imbalance , and there may be lower dopamine levels in situations where satisfaction is difficult to achieve , resulting in greater self - criticism and a relentless pursuit of optimal performance. Gifted individuals tend to present a more balanced dopaminergic regulation , especially in the ACC, which may explain their greater cognitive flexibility and ability to adapt to complex challenges. However, these individuals may also exhibit traits of perfectionism , since the high level of personal demand may be associated with the constant pursuit of high goals and the activation of the brain's reward system, which depends on dopamine to reinforce behaviors related to success and personal achievement .
Perfectionism can be both adaptive and maladaptive, and in gifted individuals both types can coexist, although maladaptive perfectionism is often more prevalent. Adaptive perfectionism refers to the ability to maintain high personal standards and at the same time demonstrate cognitive flexibility to deal with mistakes or failures, using them as opportunities for growth. In this case, the dopaminergic system acts in a balanced way, reinforcing successful and adaptive behaviors. Gifted individuals with adaptive perfectionism tend to present efficient regulation of dopamine , especially in the anterior cingulate cortex **(ACC)** , which allows them to achieve high goals without falling into excessive self- criticism [6,9].
On the other hand, maladaptive perfectionism in gifted individuals is more related to a dopaminergic imbalance , with lower dopamine levels in situations where satisfaction is difficult to achieve . This results in a relentless pursuit of perfection and a strong tendency toward self - criticism, negatively impacting emotional well-being [5,7]. Although gifted individuals may have the ability to achieve high standards , when maladaptive perfectionism predominates, they become less able to deal with mistakes and failures in a healthy way , which can lead to psychological exhaustion and cognitive rigidity.

2. Dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) : Responsible for cognitive control, planning and behavioral regulation, **the DLPFC** is linked to the definition of high goals and standards , common characteristics of perfectionism [2].

This area of the brain plays a central role in the evaluation and organization of actions , allowing the correction of strategies and the adjustment of expectations. In perfectionist individuals , the DLPFC is highly activated during planning and performance monitoring, facilitating the ability to maintain focus on specific and rigorous goals . Studies indicate that the DLPFC contributes significantly to self- correction and inhibition of impulses , promoting more careful and detail-oriented behavior, key characteristics of perfectionism [3].

Furthermore , this region is strongly influenced by neurotransmitters such as dopamine , which is involved in motivation and reward processing, regulating cognitive responses during the pursuit of high standards. Gifted individuals , who often exhibit perfectionist traits , may present enhanced activity in the DLPFC, which allows them greater control over their cognitive and behavioral strategies , both in the context of adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism [4,6].

3. Orbitofrontal cortex : Involved in the evaluation of rewards and consequences , it participates in the process of expectation of success and satisfaction **with** personal performance [1].

This brain region is crucial for making decisions based on future rewards and feedback, which may be a central factor in perfectionistic behavior. The OFC helps us assess the value of a reward or outcome, adjusting our behavior according to expectations of success or failure .

In perfectionistic individuals , the orbitofrontal cortex may be overactive, leading to a greater emphasis on self - criticism and the need to achieve high standards in order to feel satisfaction . Dysfunction or imbalance in this region may result in a relentless search for external approval and reduced satisfaction , even when achieving goals . This overactivity may explain why many perfectionists feel that they are never sufficiently satisfied with their own results , as the OFC influences the perception of success and the ability to feel full reward for one's achievements [4,6].

Furthermore , the OFC is modulated by neurotransmitters such as dopamine, which is involved in motivation and reward processing. A well-regulated dopaminergic system in this area is essential for adaptation to feedback and cognitive flexibility , which helps to adjust expectations according to reality and to allow a better response to failures and successes [5,7].

4. Amygdala : Associated with emotional control and the processing of fear and anxiety, the amygdala **is hyperactive** in situations of failure , contributing to exaggerated emotional reactions in perfectionists [3].

The neurotransmitter glutamate plays a crucial role in this functioning, being the main excitatory neurotransmitter in the brain and facilitating communication between neurons in the amygdala . During situations of maladaptive perfectionism , glutamatergic activity in the amygdala tends to be excessive, exacerbating emotional responses and increasing self - criticism and fear of failure . This glutamatergic hyperactivity is related to amplified emotional responses in situations of failure, which contributes to the cycle of anxiety and chronic stress in perfectionist individuals [3].

Glutamate, along with other neurotransmitters such as **GABA** , which has an inhibitory function , regulates the balance between excitation and inhibition in the amygdala . An imbalance between these two neurotransmitters can increase emotional reactivity and hinder cognitive flexibility , impairing the ability to deal with errors and adjust expectations adaptively [4,5]. This makes the individual more susceptible to maladaptive perfectionist behavior, characterized by the incessant search for unattainable standards and constant dissatisfaction with performance.

5. Ventral striatum : Part of the reward system, the ventral striatum is linked to motivation and feelings of pleasure . In perfectionists, its reduced activation may explain their dissatisfaction after achieving goals [3].

This area plays a crucial role in how we evaluate and seek rewards for our actions and performances. In perfectionists, activation of the ventral striatum may be reduced, which helps explain why many remain dissatisfied even after achieving their goals . Low activation can lead to a lower sense of reward , resulting in an incessant search for new goals and constant dissatisfaction with performance [3].

This dissatisfaction can be attributed to a deficient regulation of dopamine , the main neurotransmitter involved in the reward system. Dopamine plays a central role in reward processing, and its release in the ventral striatum is directly associated with the sensation of pleasure and the motivation to continue pursuing goals. When there is reduced activation of this area , perfectionists may have difficulty feeling satisfaction , even after achieving high standards of performance, which reinforces the cycle of self - criticism and the search for perfection [4,5].
Furthermore , studies show that the ventral striatum, together with other areas of the brain such **as** the prefrontal cortex , influences the evaluation of the consequences of actions and the expectation of future success. A reduction in the activity of this region can result in difficulty in processing the feeling **of** achievement , even after achieving important goals**, intensifying perfectionist** behavior [6].

Current literature indicates that these brain areas interact to form a circuit that reinforces perfectionist behavior, with an emphasis on error detection and the relentless pursuit of high standards . Hyperactivity in these regions can generate a tendency toward rigid patterns of behavior and constant dissatisfaction , which is closely related to maladaptive perfectionism [2].

Comparative relationship between neurotransmitters and brain regions :
The neurobiology of perfectionism and its associations with various psychological conditions , such as **Avoidant Personality Disorder** , **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** , **Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD)** , **Anxiety Disorders** (especially **Generalized Anxiety Disorder - GAD** and Social **Phobia**), Depression **and Mood Disorders ,** involves multiple brain regions and neurotransmitters.

6. **Dopamine and Ventral Striatum** : Dopamine is essential in the reward system, especially in the ventral striatum , influencing motivation and the sensation of pleasure. In individuals with OCD , OCPD , and Anxiety Disorders , reduced activation of the ventral striatum can cause constant dissatisfaction , which intensifies perfectionism and the incessant pursuit of unattainable goals . Low dopamine is also related to the difficulty in feeling pleasure after achievement , which occurs in both obsessive disorders and mood disorders, such as depression [4,5].

7. **Glutamate and Amygdala** : **Glutamate** plays an important role in the functioning of the **amygdala ,** which is associated with the **processing of fear and anxiety** . In individuals with **Avoidant Personality Disorder** , **GAD** , and **social phobia** , glutamate hyperactivity in the **amygdala leads** to exaggerated emotional reactions to failure or criticism , exacerbating self - criticism and the fear of not meeting expectations . Furthermore , the imbalance between glutamate and **GABA** , an inhibitory neurotransmitter , can intensify cognitive rigidity and make it difficult to adapt to new challenges, common features in eating disorders and OCD [3,5].

8. **Dopamine and Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC) :** The **ACC** is related to error monitoring and self - correction , important functions in perfectionist behavior. In gifted and **highly able individuals** , the **dopaminergic system in** the ACC tends to be more balanced, which allows for greater cognitive flexibility. However, in **maladaptive perfectionism** , low dopamine in this region can lead to an intensification of self - criticism and increased fear of failure, phenomena that are less common in people with anxiety disorders and depression [4,6].

9. **Serotonin and the Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex (DLPFC)** : **Serotonin** also exerts an influence on the **DLPFC ,** especially in the regulation of behaviors related to **decision-making and inhibitory** control **. Imbalances** in serotonin can result in difficulty planning and organizing actions , a feature seen in **personality disorders** such as **OCPD** and in people with eating disorders and social phobia, where perfectionism is a dominant component [2].

Environmental factors and neurobiological influences :

In addition to genetic and neurochemical factors , high expectations , a history of criticism in childhood , and competitive environments contribute to the development of perfectionism. These factors can alter the response of the limbic system , particularly the amygdala , making individuals more susceptible to stress and self - criticism . These environmental **influences** , in combination with a predisposed neurobiology , amplify maladaptive perfectionism, exacerbating the effects of the neurotransmitters and brain regions mentioned [7].

Systematic vs. Perfectionist : When Methodical Organization Becomes an Unattainable Demand

The comparison between the systematic and the perfectionist reveals subtle but important differences in terms of control, organization , and expectations of results. The systematic is an organized, methodical , and efficient person who seeks to carry out his or her tasks in a structured manner, focusing on consistency and precision . This approach is guided by the need to follow a well - defined process, which allows the systematic to adapt when obstacles arise . His or her main focus is on achieving objectives within clear standards , but without obsessing over perfection .

On the other hand, the perfectionist tends to go beyond the organization , placing a strong weight on achieving extremely high standards , often impossible to achieve . Perfectionism can be associated with constant self-criticism and an incessant search to avoid mistakes . Unlike the systematic , the perfectionist is often not satisfied with the result, even if the objective has been achieved, as he always sees areas that could be improved. In addition, perfectionism is often linked to greater cognitive rigidity, which can hinder adaptation and lead to constant dissatisfaction [3,7].

In short, while the systematician maintains a structured but adaptable and healthy approach to expectations , the perfectionist places an excessive emphasis on ideal and often unattainable performance , which can result in emotional burnout and ongoing stress.

3. Final Considerations

Perfectionism is a phenomenon that can manifest itself in two main forms: adaptive and maladaptive, with clear neurobiological roots . In maladaptive perfectionism, there is low dopamine in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), which are regions responsible for executive control and error monitoring. This dopamine deficit hinders cognitive and emotional flexibility, resulting in excessive self-criticism and a relentless pursuit of unattainable standards . In addition , excess glutamate in the amygdala intensifies emotional responses to failure, such as fear and anxiety, leading to cognitive rigidity and constant dissatisfaction . This pattern is common in people with disorders such as OCD, OCPD, and anxiety disorders, who experience a cycle of destructive self - criticism .

On the other hand, adaptive perfectionism is associated with efficient regulation of dopamine in these same brain areas , which allows the individual to maintain high standards without the negative emotional burden. Individuals with adaptive perfectionism are able to obtain satisfaction when achieving goals and show greater flexibility in dealing with errors and imperfections . In this case, the amygdala is not hyperactivated , or if it is more activated , there is on -demand control, allowing a balanced emotional response that transforms errors into opportunities for growth. This profile is more common in gifted individuals , who have more developed cognitive and executive control capacities, which facilitates the healthy pursuit of excellence.

However, we cannot say that adaptive perfectionism is exclusive to gifted individuals. Individuals with good emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility can also manifest this type of perfectionism, regardless of their level of intelligence . Likewise , gifted individuals can also present maladaptive perfectionism when subjected to excessive internal and external pressures , which negatively impact their neurochemical balance .

Therefore, the cause of perfectionism is directly linked to a combination of neurobiological factors and emotional and environmental pressures . In maladaptive perfectionism, the imbalance between low dopamine and high glutamate reactivity contributes to excessive self-criticism and an incessant pursuit of unrealistic standards . In adaptive perfectionism, healthy neurochemical regulation allows the pursuit of high standards to be productive and emotionally balanced . Thus, perfectionism is the result of a complex interaction between brain functioning and external influences , and can be both a path to excellence and a factor of emotional exhaustion.

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