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Abstract

Perfectionism is defined as “a tendency to set unrealistically high standards of performance [and is associated with] biased and overcritical evaluations of the self and others” (Ocampo, Wang, Kiazed, Restubog, & Ashkanasy, 2020: 144). While researchers of occupations have alluded to perfectionism in their studies (e.g., Michel, 2011), prior research on perfectionism, has tended to treat it as an individual level construct (e.g., personality trait). This research has recognized that perfectionism can lead to either positive and negative outcomes for both people and their work, though the darker side of perfectionism has been more closely attended to. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that some occupations normalize or even demand perfectionism from those who wish to enter and succeed in them. Research offers some hints about how occupations may socialize workers into the institutional norms of perfectionism (e.g., Burrow, Smith, & Yakinthou, 2015; Michel, 2011). But we lack an understanding of how workers maintain their commitment and ability to function in such fields. We argue that perfectionism should be seen not only as a personality trait, but also an orientation toward work that is – at least partly – embedded in institutional norms of a community. This study aims to understand the interplay between the occupational norms and workers’ response. This paper makes the following contributions. First, we complement the individual-focused research on perfectionism by highlighting the role institutional norms in promoting – or even, demanding – perfectionism from workers, despite the fact that the well-known “darker” side of perfectionism. Second, we contribute to the research on inhabited institutions (Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006) that has emphasized that institutions exist to the extent that there are people who inhabit them and make them experientially real (Voronov & Weber, 2020). Yet, our study helps to understand better the struggles by which the inhabiting process unfolds – in a provisional and tentative manner. Third, we contribute to the literature on occupations (Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, 2016) by explaining how and why people might persist in an occupation that is detrimental to their mental and physical wellbeing.