Are Latter-day Saints Perfectionists?

Guest Editor's Introduction

W. Justin Dyer

> The truth is that you are *not* perfect, and neither is anyone else. And this is incredibly good news. —Arthur C. Brooks[1]

A while back, I was sitting in a university meeting at the beginning of another school year. A therapist was facilitating a helpful discussion on the growing concern of student mental health. When toxic perfectionism came up, the facilitator mentioned in an offhanded way that we have a particular problem with this at Brigham Young University (BYU) because of "the gospel." This statement was not much of a surprise given the seemingly common attitude that BYU students (and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in general) struggle with perfectionism.

Some scholars have even suggested Latter-day Saints struggle more with perfectionism than those of other faiths. Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, and Samuel F. Mikail (arguably the preeminent scholars of perfectionism) claimed: "[Toxic] perfectionism . . . [is] a general societal pressure to be perfect, such as the collective social pressures to be perfect that have been identified in descriptions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."[2] In another instance Flett and Hewitt wrote: "It is generally accepted that perfectionism is elevated and highly salient

1. Arthur C. Brooks, "You're Not Perfect," *The Atlantic,* June 6, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/06/perfect-flaws-happiness/678593/.

2. Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, and Samuel F. Mikail, *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach to Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment* (Guilford Press, 2017), 43.

among community members of Mormon faith in Utah. Several media stories have highlighted the pressures to be perfect in a part of Utah and labeled this 'toxic perfectionism.'"[3] Another therapist, author, and podcaster referred to Latter-day Saints as a "notoriously perfectionistic population."[4]

These attitudes are seemingly hard to argue with. Latter-day Saints accept scriptures such as "be ye therefore perfect" (Matt. 5:48; 3 Ne. 12:28). It's also hard to miss scriptures about fire and brimstone for those who do not obey the commandments (see Ps. 11:6; 2 Ne. 26:6; D&C 97:26). And our own experiences may even suggest that our religion contributes to an unhealthy perfectionism. Indeed, most, if not all, active Latter-day Saints have experienced stress over not measuring up while trying to accomplish all that is asked. And with many people in Western societies taking a dim view of religion in general, we might expect religion to be bad for mental health. Sigmund Freud famously compared religion to "a childhood neurosis,"[5] and Christopher Hitchens declares as the title of his book that "God Is Not Great," followed by the subtitle "How Religion Poisons Everything" (this was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and has been listed as the "Editor's pick, Best Nonfiction," on Amazon.com).[6]

Given scholars' statements, our own experiences, and the cultural waters we swim in, it seems reasonable that religious people (and perhaps Latter-day Saints in particular) may be more likely to struggle with crippling perfectionism. At the same time, as I sat in that university meeting, I realized there had been no research that compares the perfectionism of Latter-day Saints to the perfectionism of members in other religions. Somewhat ironically, all the therapists and researchers who have said Latter-day Saints are higher on the scale of perfectionism than others have done so in the absence of any research.

I was aware of this lack of research because, for the last eight years, several colleagues and I have been studying the mental health of Latter-day Saint youth. We have been following over two thousand youth the

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3. Gordon L. Flett and Paul L. Hewitt, *Perfectionism in Childhood and Adolescence: A Developmental Analysis* (American Psychological Association, 2022), 167.

4. Donna Bevan-Lee, "Mormonism and the Pursuit of Perfection," Medium.com, November 16, 2019, https://medium.com/@donna.bevanlee/mormonism-and-the-pursuit-of-perfection-54646372c949.

5. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion,* trans. and ed. James Strachey (W. W. Norton, 1961), 53.

6. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve Books, 2007).

past six years (about half Latter-day Saint, half not), examining how their faith and family connect to their mental health.

When the BYU therapist facilitating the discussion implied that "the gospel" caused perfectionism, I realized that we hadn't yet analyzed the data on perfectionism from our study. So, during that meeting, I pulled out my laptop and, for the first time, began to crunch numbers on the perfectionism of Latter-day Saints, looking at how they compared to others. And when I looked at the initial results, it was clear the narrative we commonly hear was missing something important. It was also clear that a broad effort was needed to better understand perfectionism among Latter-day Saints.

This issue of *BYU Studies* is a response to that need for such a broad effort and contains the work of excellent scholars and practitioners examining the concept of perfectionism from a combined scholarly and Latter-day Saint perspective. Included is the most recent thinking on what perfectionism is, what causes it, what it causes, and what we can do about it. And, as Latter-day Saints, we are particularly interested in how the concept of perfectionism does and does not overlap with restored gospel truths about our potential for perfection.

What Is Perfectionism?

The article titled "Understanding Perfectionism" in this issue explores the definition of perfectionism, both its healthy and toxic forms. However, in brief, I note here that toxic perfectionism is not necessarily about having high standards, nor is it necessarily about not meeting one's standards. Toxic perfectionism is more about how we *feel about ourselves when we don't meet our standards or when we make mistakes.* This is a crucial distinction to have in mind throughout this issue. We see many people confused in how they think about perfectionism because (1) they are aware that high standards should be good, but (2) they realize there may be negative psychological and emotional consequences to not meeting high standards.[7] The key is to separate having high standards from how we feel about ourselves when we don't meet those standards. As scholar Brené Brown has said, "*Perfectionism is not the same thing as striving to be your best.* Perfectionism is not about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the

7. See the articles by Goodman and McClendon in this issue for details about how perfectionism and obsessive compulsive disorder (including scrupulosity) overlap.

pain of blame, judgment, and shame. It's a shield. . . . *Perfectionism is not self-improvement.* Perfectionism is, at its core, about trying to earn approval and acceptance."[8]

You will find in this issue a helpful roadmap to understanding just what healthy and toxic perfectionism are and how to obtain the good while avoiding the bad. As quoted at the beginning of this introduction, the realization that we are not perfect is, if understood correctly, incredibly good news for us and can help us connect better with ourselves, others, and Deity.

The Evidence We Use

As scholars, we believe that high-quality evidence is crucial to our endeavor here. As has been said, "without data you're just a person with an opinion."[9] In this issue, we have attempted to use the best research that currently exists and push the research field forward by analyzing data we have collected. Several of the articles in this issue report analyses using the "Family Foundations of Youth Development" study.[10] This study began in 2016, when we surveyed youth who were approximately twelve to fourteen years old along with one of their parents. Data on these same youth were collected every other year (2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022). In 2016, youth in Utah were surveyed; then in 2018, youth in Arizona were added to the study; and in 2020, youth from California were added. All youth were surveyed again in 2022 and 2024. In order to obtain as unbiased a sample as possible, we worked with the marketing firm Data Axel to obtain the contact information of households with youth ages twelve to fourteen. From their database of millions of households, we requested a random sample of several thousand households within the geographic areas we were interested in. Our amazing student research assistants recruited participants by letter and by telephone calls. Individuals could participate only if they had been part of the random-selection process. We often had participants ask if their friends could also take

8. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 75, emphasis original.

9. W. Edwards Deming, quoted in Milo Jones and Philippe Silberzahn, "Without An Opinion, You're Just Another Person with Data," Forbes.com, updated March 15, 2016, https://www.forbes.com/sites/silberzahnjones/2016/03/15/without-an-opinion-youre-just-another-person-with-data/.

10. See "Family Foundations of Youth Development," Brigham Young University, accessed September 13, 2024, https://foundations.byu.edu (hereafter cited as Foundations data).

the survey. They were told they could not. We also did not advertise on social media or any other outlets. Only those randomly selected could participate. Over the years, parents and children received an incentive to participate—between $25 and $35 for their responses each year. In all, over two thousand youth and one of their parents have participated in the study. See the appendix for additional details about this study.

What is particularly important is that we have data on the same individuals at multiple time points. This allows us to better understand "chicken and egg" questions, such as determining how perfectionism may influence other things (religious participation, mental health, and so on) and how these other things influence perfectionism. Very little research on perfectionism is longitudinal, and thus, this issue contains some of the highest-quality research on perfectionism in general and on Latter-day Saints in particular. Through the diligence of our student research assistants, we have been able to retain over 70% of the sample over the years.[11] More details about the sample are available at foundations.byu.edu.

Given people's desire to look good, it is often asked whether self-reported data can be trusted. There are indeed concerns with accuracy of self-reported data, and it is important to acknowledge that most data used in the studies reported on in this issue rely on self-reported data. But to examine the intersections of perfectionism, mental health, and religiosity, the individual's own thoughts and feelings are what we were most interested in. It is difficult (if not impossible) to examine a person's perfectionism or mental health or connection to the divine without asking them about it. However, although there may be some misreporting, research has shown that religious individuals, and Latter-day Saints in particular, are the most likely to give accurate self-reports.[12] While religious individuals may feel more embarrassed about reporting things that do not make them "look good," they are more likely to accurately report those things. Thus, while we should acknowledge the limitations inherent in self-reported data, it is also important to acknowledge that the Latter-day Saints in our sample are, based on previous research, likely to report with a high degree of accuracy.

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11. As a comparison, a study of religion by Harvard and Notre Dame professors was able to obtain only a 53% response rate after just a single year. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon & Schuster: 2010), 558.

12. Mark D. Regnerus and Jeremy E. Uecker, "Religious Influences on Sensitive Self-Reported Behaviors," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2007): 145–63.

Outline of This *BYU Studies* Issue

This issue has twin purposes. One is to summarize and extend the best scholarly research on perfectionism, particularly about Latter-day Saints, who are a group often assumed to have higher levels of toxic perfectionism (an unwarranted and unfortunate assumption, as will be seen). The second purpose is to help Latter-day Saint youth, parents, teachers, and leaders understand this misunderstood concept and what they can do to help the youth thrive by building healthy perfectionism and avoid its toxic manifestations. Thus, we have had both a scholarly and lay audience in mind when writing these articles.

In the first article, titled "Understanding Perfectionism," the authors address the definitions of perfectionism used in research and therapy. Often when we use the term "perfectionism," we do so without much serious thought as to what it means and its healthy and unhealthy aspects. The authors of this article help us see what these aspects look like and lay the definitional landscape for the other articles.

Next, "Perfectionism Across Adolescence" focuses on youth and toxic perfectionism, examining how it changes from early adolescence to late adolescence. This article outlines how our society today may create particular problems for youth (toxic perfectionism appears to have increased over the last few decades) and which youth may be most vulnerable to those problems. It also examines how boys and girls differ in perfectionism and how social-media use, location, and sexual orientation may all relate to toxic perfectionism.

The three following articles examine family, religion, and mental health as both causes and effects of toxic perfectionism. "Parental Influence on Adolescent Perfectionism" outlines how parents may influence their children's perfectionism and what aspects of parenting relate most to Latter-day Saint youth's toxic perfectionism. "Perfectionism's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health" helps answer the critical question of why we should be interested in perfectionism in the first place. As the article demonstrates, the more our youth experience toxic perfectionism, the more likely they are to have serious mental health difficulties (see pp. 74–85). "Religion and Perfectionism" addresses how religion relates to toxic perfectionism. This is the first analysis of which we are aware that compares the perfectionism of Latter-day Saints and former Latter-day Saints to those of other faiths and no faith. Putting additional emphasis on the need to study perfectionism, this article demonstrates how toxic perfectionism may derail Latter-day Saint youth from the covenant path (p. 101).

The next article, "Healing from Toxic Perfectionism," approaches toxic perfectionism from a clinical perspective, while providing hope and outlining a process of healing. For those struggling with toxic perfectionism (or those helping others in their struggle), this article is a boon. McClendon explains that toxic perfectionism includes the distortion that our behavior affects our worth (pp. 130–33). The implications of her data are clearly echoed in Adam Miller's essay, "Love Is a Law, Not a Reward." McClendon concludes that we already have God's love, and we already have our infinite worth. Toxic perfectionism says, falsely, that God's love and our worth are earned and that the price we must pay is complete perfection. This price, of course, is one we can never pay, nor are we asked to pay it. In the history of the world, only a single sinless life was needed (see 1 Jn. 3:5), and that life was fully lived by Jesus the Christ, through whom we can heal, by degrees, and eventually learn to love as he loves and become as he is.

Conclusion

We think what we found in our research will surprise many Latter-day Saints (there were many surprises for us along the way). With the sustained secular winds that seem to blow against The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and religion in general, we need high-quality research and thinking that critically examines popular narratives about organized religion, which often mislead rather than inform. Such research shows how Latter-day Saints are influenced by perfectionism. We hope this issue of *BYU Studies* will be helpful to Latter-day Saints as they work to reduce toxic perfectionism and instead seek the healing and healthy ideas about perfection through Christ.

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