Perfectionism: Secondary pupils' perceptions of pressures contributing to perfectionism, and its relationship with emotional wellbeing

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Abstract

This sequential mixed methods study explored experiences and perceptions of perfectionism in a sample of secondary aged children and adolescents. Phase 1 assessed the relationship between different domains of perfectionism and depression and anxiety in 114 pupils reporting high levels of perfectionism aged between 11-15 years (M= 12.73) attending six secondary schools in two English counties. Phase 2 employed thematic analysis (TA) to explore factors pupils perceived as drivers of their perfectionism. Six participants (four females, two males) participated in this qualitative phase (M= 13 years old). For phase 1 multiple regressions showed that self oriented perfectionism-critical (SOP-C) contributed significantly to depression and anxiety. Socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) contributed significantly to depression, whereas self oriented perfectionism-striving (SOP-S) did not significantly contribute to either. For phase 2 factors perceived to impact on pupils' perfectionism were represented by seven themes. Findings build our understanding of childhood perfectionism, what children and young people (CYP) perceive the sources of perfectionism to be, helping explain links between perfectionism and negative outcomes with greater precision. Implications for practice and further research are discussed.

Key words: please insert six key words or short phrases – these are used to assist article visibility in online searches

Perfectionism. Adolescence. Emotional wellbeing. Secondary schools. Perceived causes.

Introduction and review of research

Smith et al., (2022) review 30 years of research looking at perfectionism. At the broadest level perfectionism is characterised as a personality trait where a person is "rigid and extreme in their expectations and self- evaluations, and both concerned with and, at times driven to, attain perfection." (Smith et al., p. 17). Before the turn of the century a two factor model of understanding perfectionism as strivings for perfection and 'perfectionistic concerns' was prevalent. These were sometimes seen as setting extremely high standards for oneself, and subsequent harsh self-criticism if those standards are not accomplished (Limburg et al., 2017). Over time this has given way to a number of multidimensional approaches and conceptualisations (Stoeber, 2018; Hewitt et al., 2017; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Frost et al., 1990),
Perfectionism appears to be increasing at a population level (Curran & Hill, 2017; Kurz, 2021),
While it is sometimes referred to as a 'double edged sword' (Stoeber, 2018, p36) in recognition that it can drive people to achieve high standards, research has increasingly established links between perfectionism and negative outcomes (Starley, 2019). It is this relationship between perfectionism and negative outcomes, or the maladaptive aspects of perfectionism (Wegerer, 2024) that is of interest here. There is a need to understand perfectionism more fully, including its origins and drivers, especially in childhood and adolescence.

In 1991, Hewitt and Flett argued that perfectionism was comprised of three interpersonal and intrapersonal elements: socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP), self-oriented perfectionism (SOP) and other oriented perfectionism (OOP), and that each played an important role in manifestations of perfectionism. This three dimensional approach has become more

established, with the theoretical review by Smith et al. (2022) arguing that "The reliability, validity, and clinical utility of these three dimensions have since been extensively documented" (p. 17).

SSP (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004) describes the belief that perfection is important to other people, thus individuals high in this aspect of perfectionism believe that other people expect perfection from them, and will be critical of them if they do not meet this.

SOP itself is not a uni-dimensional construct (Dunkley et al., 2006). O'Connor et al. (2009) report that factor analysis of the Children and Adolescents Perfectionism Scale (CAPS; Flett et al., 2000) shows that a two factor structure of SOP has emerged, SOP-Striving (SOP-S) and SOP-Critical (SOP-C). SOP-S has been defined as an adaptive striving for high standards and perfectionism (for example, 'I try to be perfect in everything I do'), whereas SOP- C includes self-critical thoughts (for example, 'I get mad at myself when I make a mistake') and is therefore thought to be maladaptive (O'Connor et al., 2009). OOP refers to an individual's high expectations of other people, which while an interesting aspect of perfectionism fell outside the scope of this study in considering internalised experiences of perfectionism.

Development of perfectionism

When conceived of as a personality trait there is some evidence that, as with other traits, there will be a range of factors affecting the development of perfectionism, including genetic or biological factors (Stoeber, 2018). Starley (2019), however, notes that the consensus is that this is likely to be limited and that research is shifting away from this conceptualisation. Much research agrees that perfectionism develops as a result of the interaction between individuals and significant others in their social environment, especially during childhood and adolescence. Flett et al. (2002) outline four theoretical family history models; the social reaction model of perfectionism (SRMP), the social expectations model (SEM), the anxious

rearing model (ARM) and the social learning model (SLM). These models argue that parents and close peers impact perfectionism, albeit via different mechanisms. Perfectionistic traits are developed in order to encourage acceptance of themselves by themselves, and others (Hewitt et al., 2017).

Findings from Smith et al. (2019) indicated that mothers' and siblings' levels of other oriented perfectionism (OOP; individuals expecting perfection *from* other people) predicted individuals' depression symptomology via their level of SPP. However this relationship was not found for fathers', peers' or romantic partners' OOP. Thus it may be that some significant figures in individuals' lives impact their level of perfectionism more than others.

Morris and Lomax (2014) proposed an 'eco-systemic developmental model' of perfectionism, which includes influences from parenting, attachment experience, intergenerational transmission, cognition (for example, Howell et al., 2019) and environmental factors which parallels Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) bioecological systems theory.

Longitudinal research suggests that levels of perfectionism in young people under 25 years of age has increased linearly over the last three decades (Curran & Hill, 2017). The authors suggest that increased 'competitive individualism', driven by the harsher social and economic climate (Ipsos Mori, 2014), may be an explanatory factor in this pattern. As perfectionism appears to be increasing at a population level, and with research establishing links between perfectionism and poor mental and physical health outcomes, there is an urgent need to understand perfectionism, its origins and drivers, especially in the childhood and adolescent period, and explore early intervention (Starley, 2019).

There is relatively little research that identifies and explores factors that protect against perfectionism. However, in a three month longitudinal study with 265 and 170 participants aged

14-19 years at time one (outset of the study) and time two (three months later) respectively, Domocus and Damian (2018) reported that teacher support significantly predicted a longitudinal decrease in SOP and perfectionistic concerns.

Perfectionism can change throughout childhood and adolescence; increases in manifestations of perfectionism are observed in the mid-late adolescent period (Herman et al., 2013; Stoeber et al., 2009). Echoing research with adult populations, research with CYP also implicates perfectionism in a wide range of mental health disorders and correlates; OCD (Lunn et al., 2023; Libby et al., 2004), fear and sadness (Stornelli et al., 2009), internalising behaviours (Cook & Kearney, 2009), body dissatisfaction (Evans et al., 2008), longer anorexia-nervosa illness periods (Nilsson et al., 2008), developing an eating disorder (Bills et al., 2023; Wade et al., 2015), suicide and suicide attempts (Bell et al., 2010; Boergers et al., 1998; Freudenstein et al., 2012), SOP and anxiety (Hewitt et al., 2002), bullying and social hopelessness (Roxborough et al., 2012), SOP and depression (Lunn et al., 2023; Huggins et al., 2008), although this relationship may be moderated by self-compassion (Ferrari et al., 2018).

Rationale for the current study and research questions

Given the extensive catalogue of negative associations the current study sought to establish to what extent an association between perfectionism and experiences of anxiety depression might exist in a secondary school aged population in general mainstream schools in the UK who report high levels of perfectionism, and secondly, to explore the perceptions of young people's understanding of what might contribute to it.

The study used a sequential mixed methods design in order to provide different perspectives on the phenomenon in question (Johnson et al., 2014; Hirose & Creswell, 2023), with a relational design in phase 1 and semi-structured interviews allowing qualitative data to be elicited in phase

2. It adopted a pluralist perspective overall (Johnson et al., 2014) with a critical realist stance in phase 1 and a constructionist stance in phase 2. While critical realism could be seen as an overarching ontological position (Booker, 2021).

In more specific terms the current study aimed to explore the relationship between perfectionism dimensions (SOP-S, SOP-C and SPP) and depression and anxiety in secondary school CYP in England, and to gather insight from CYP regarding where they perceive the pressures to be perfectionistic originating from.

Thus the two research questions were:

1. Is there a relationship between perfectionism and anxiety and depression in secondary aged pupils?
2. What do CYP think drives perfectionistic tendencies?

Method

Participants

A purposive and convenience sampling approach was adopted to select and invite secondary schools in two English counties to participate. Pupils from one independent school, one single sex grammar school for girls, and four state comprehensive schools participated in the research. Parents of pupils in the six participating schools were invited to consent to their child's participation, regardless of their child's gender, special educational need, socioeconomic status or primary language.

114 pupils aged between 11-15 years participated in the first phase of the study (M= 12.73) (SD= 1.03). Pupils in years 10 and 11 were under-represented in this sample, as four of the participating schools agreed only to invite younger year groups to participate to avoid disruption to older pupils' GCSE examination preparation. In phase two of the research, six pupils participated. Four of the six participants (67%) were female (one aged 11 years, one aged 13 years and two aged 15 years). The male participants were aged 11 years and 13 years. The six pupils were invited to

meet on a 1:1 basis with the researcher in a private, quiet room in the school, during the normal school day.

The sample size of 114 participants for phase 1 of the study meant that this phase had sufficient power (0.8) with a medium effect size (d= .5) and .05 alpha level (Cohen, 1992).

The research was granted full ethical approval by the host University's Research Ethics Committee.

Procedure

Parents of 5400 pupils on roll at the six participating schools were sent information sheets and consent forms via email. Parents could consent for their child(ren) to participate in just the first phase of the research, or both phase one and two. Lists of pupils whose parents had returned signed consent forms were compiled, and those pupils were invited to an information session whereby they were provided with a verbal presentation explaining the research, and a copy of the pupil information sheet to read independently. Pupils were asked to complete the online questionnaires that were held on a secure server. Pupils were required to complete an online consent/assent form before the questionnaires could be accessed.

Once the phase one questionnaire data had been collected, those pupils whose perfectionism scores reached/exceeded the 95th percentile were identified. These 114 pupils were stratified into age groups (11-12, 13-14, 15-16 years of age) and 2 pupils were randomly sampled from each strata and invited to participate in phase 2. Participants with high perfectionism scores were selected for the second research phase as the research question focussed on their experiences of perfectionism. Pupils with low perfectionism scores may not have had the insight or experience to be able to contribute meaningfully to this question.

Measures used in Phase 1.

Short CAPS

The Short Children and Adolescent Perfectionism Scale (CAPS- O'Connor et al., 2009) was used to measure self-oriented perfectionism (striving and critical) and socially prescribed perfectionism. The Short CAPS is a self-report, adapted, shorter 14 item version of the original 22 item CAPS (Hewitt et al., 1997) and was developed after factor analyses advocated for the three factor structure, as opposed to the original two factor structure (SOP and SPP). O'Connor et al. (2009) suggest that the SOP component comprised two distinct elements, SOP- critical and SOP- striving. SOP-striving has been defined as an adaptive striving for perfectionism, whereas SOP-critical includes self-critical thoughts and is therefore thought to be maladaptive.

The 14 items are measured using Likert scales which range from 1 ('not at all true of me') to 5 ('very true of me'). The Short CAPS was chosen as it required US grade 3 reading ability (8-9 years of age), so was deemed to be appropriate for use with the target age range. Previous research has reported the internal consistency of the measure (average of Cronbach alpha for all 3 subscales) as α= .77 (O'Connor et al. , 2009), α= .83 (Fairweather-Schmidt & Wade, 2015), suggesting acceptable and good levels of internal consistency, respectively. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .87, which suggests very good internal consistency.

BECK Youth Inventory

The anxiety and depression subscales of the BECK Youth Inventory ™- Second Edition (BYI-II) were used to measure pupils' self-reported symptoms of anxiety and depression. Prior research has found the BYI-II to have good/excellent internal consistency; α= .86- .96 for CYP aged between 11-18 years of age (Deighton et al., 2014). In the current study both BECK measures showed very good internal consistency; the Cronbach alpha coefficient was α= .90 and α= .93 for BECK depression subscale (BECK D) and BECK anxiety scale (BECK A), respectively.

Phase 2: Qualitative interviews.

Semi structured interviews were used to elicit participants' perspectives of the drivers of perfectionism participants were first asked about what they understood perfectionism to be, electing a description of what a perfectionist might be like. Participants were then asked the question 'what do you think causes people to be perfectionists?'. Both questions were followed by additional prompts. Interviews lasted 30-40 minutes, were recorded, and then transcribed soon afterwards. Audio files were safely destroyed after transcription.

Data Analysis

Phase 1

The independent variables (IVs) included in the quantitative analyses were SOP-S (self-oriented perfectionism- striving; setting ambitious goals for oneself), SOP-C (self-oriented perfectionism critical- directing criticism into oneself if ambitious goals are not achieved) and SPP (Socially Prescribed Perfectionism). There were two separate dependent variables (DVs): depression and anxiety.

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed initially on these data to identify those participants whose total perfectionism scores reached, or exceeded, the 95th percentile for the sample. Anxiety and depression were then regressed simultaneously on all aspects of perfectionism using standard multiple regression. Complete sets of assessment results were available for 106 participants, which was above the minimum sample size of 102 required to achieve statistical power of 80% for a medium effect at the 5% significance level (Cohen, 1992). This phase of the research aligned with a more critical realist epistemological stance.

Phase 2

Participants' data regarding their perceptions of the origins/drivers of perfectionistic tendencies was analysed using data driven inductive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012).

Thematic analysis was chosen, as opposed to other qualitative analysis approaches because it suited the constructionist epistemological stance of this part of the research. NVivo 11 software was used to code the transcripts and extract resultant themes.

Results

The quantitative data collected in phase 1 of this study was screened for outliers, and assessed for normality. There were no missing data. Three outliers were found within the scores for SOP-striving; the decision was made to include the data to maintain the overall power in the analysis. Therefore, in line with guidance by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), those extreme low scores were assigned a value that was 1 point lower than the next most extreme score, thus reducing the impact of these outliers. The Z values for the skew and kurtosis of all variables fell well within the accepted range for normality (i.e. < 3.29, alpha level .05; Kim, 2013), and thus the data was considered normally distributed. The data thus met the assumptions for simultaneous linear multiple regression.

Research Question 1

Is there a relationship between perfectionism and anxiety and depression in secondary aged pupils?

A large significant correlation was found between depression and anxiety scores (r= .703, p= .001). Depression scores and SOP-C were found to be moderately correlated (r= .403, p= .001) and depression scores and SPP were found to be highly correlated (r= .354, p= .001). A small, non-significant correlation was found between SOP-S and depression scores, r= .105 (p= n.s.). See table 1 for all correlations.

Simultaneous multiple regression analyses showed that the three theorised perfectionism components accounted for 23.4% of the variance in depression scores, R^2= .234, F(3,110)= 11.2, p= .001. Thus, the regression model significantly predicted depression scores in this sample. Both

SOP-C (β= 4.12, p= .001) and SPP (β =.247, p= .007) significantly contributed to the model, however SOP-S did not (β =-.182, p= .072).

There was a large (Cohen, 1992), significant correlation between anxiety scores and SOP-C (*r*= .546, *p*=.000). Smaller significant correlations were found between anxiety scores and SOP-S (*r*= .228, *p*= .007) and SPP (*r*=.283, *p*= .001). Simultaneous multiple regression analyses (with SOP-C, SOP-S and SPP as independent variables) showed that the three perfectionism variables accounted for 31.5% of the variance in anxiety scores (which was the dependent variable in this analysis), R^2= .315, F(3, 110)= 16.83, *p= .001*. Of the three IVs, only SOP-C significantly contributed to the overall model (β= .569, *p= .001*). Independently, SOP-S and SPP did not contribute to the model (β= -.110, *p*= .249 and β= .101, *p*= .239, respectively).

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Research question 2

What do CYP think drives perfectionistic tendencies?

This question was explored during the phase two interviews with all six phase two participants. The identified themes were: academic assessment, external reinforcement, direct and indirect communication, aspiration for positive future, peer influence and personal factors. Figure 1 shows the final thematic map.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In order to optimise the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis (TA), direct quotes from participant interviews have been used (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Member checking (which is a way to allow participants to access the data to check for accuracy and whether it aligned with what they contributed) was not attempted as Guba and

Lincoln (1981) described this process as a continuous and ongoing process during the data analysis process, and this was precluded by the distance between the researcher's base and three of the phase two participants.

Academic assessment

Exams

This theme focussed on how participants' perceived the way their academic achievement was assessed. One sub theme focussed on school exams, and participants seemed to identify both positive and negative aspects of these. There was recognition that examinations brought pressure, and this pressure seemed to be generated by the perceived importance of exam marks in measuring potential and having a successful future:

'I also think things like schools and stuff… exams. I think exams are good, because they like push you to work hard, and actually get good results, get a good job and stuff like that reach your full potential.' (participant 5)

Marking systems

Participants described the way that their academic achievement was judged added pressures. An awareness of the comparative nature of the marking systems was noted, as well as the intensity of grade based feedback at times. Participants reported that having grades based on performance in a small space of time on one day added pressures, and favoured performance being based on a wider range of activities/times.

'Because I think that it would be better if like, your grade or something was kind of measured on different aspects. Like, you work in lessons, kind of because they didn't really do coursework anymore so everything is based on one or two hours? One hour thing? So if you have a bad day, then it's kind of like the whole two years' (Participant 3)

Direct communication

Participants reported that pressures to be perfect were directly communicated by teachers and parents, and also in instructions/advice received and in judgement from others.

Teachers

Older participants reported feeling that they had been influenced by what teachers had told them directly:

'*And I had a few teachers, you know saying, I think XXXX should be head boy. And that influenced me quite a lot.' (Participant 6)*

'yeah because I usually take what teachers say as right because they've done fairly well in life and they're telling me what I should do and giving me advice so I should listen to it.'(Participant 3)

Parents

Participants reported that a driver towards perfectionism for them was high standards being communicated directly from their parents. In instances where participants mentioned a particular parent, most often they mentioned their mother as an influence on their tendency toward perfectionism. Only one participant (male) mentioned their father, but gave no examples as to how his father impacted this.

'well my mum is a really pushy mum. She tries making me get high grades and high standards. But so, if someone doesn't really have a family that pushes you, you will not probably not try as much because I can see that in families like my friends if their families don't really like try to help them and stuff. And try to tell them not to be naughty and stuff. And that can probably cause them not to try to be good in school.' (Participant 3)

Judgment from others

Two of the 15 year old participants reported that other people's judgement of them was a factor in their tendency toward perfectionism. They did not specify who these people were, referring to 'other people' and 'everyone else'.

'And like, how people see you is quite a big thing. So people don't see us quite nice and proper, and stuff a lot of people might look you down. So I think judgement is quite a huge factor in perfectionism' (Participant 5)

Instructions/ advice

Participants reported that direct advice or instructions communicated by others impacted perfectionism. Their accounts seemed to infer that there were number of people in their life giving them advice, which was sometimes conflicting/ incongruent with advice from others.

'Lots of people telling you to do something'(Participant 1)

'yeah like older friends like year 11s that tell you it's better to do this, or that' (Participant 2)

'*So it's a sticky situation to be in when you've got lots of people telling you different things and what to be and what not to be. But yeah I would say do what you think is right.' (Participant 4)*

Indirect communication

A theme of indirect communication was found, which comprised subthemes of: parents, ethnic background, reputation based on past performance, and social media.

Reputation based on past performance

Participants seemed to infer that their behaviour or performance would cause others to build a reputation about them. It seems that participants thought their reputations would cause other

people to expect a certain standard for them to have to live up to, or even exceed in the future. Some participants spoke generally about their reputation adopted by others:

'yeah then you will have a reputation yeah and you have to live up to it' (Participant 4)

'But if I do do well, then I think I might have a reputation from my parents, teachers, friends, and then next time if you don't do well then it's like ooh. I don't know though because personally I don't feel pressure from my parents or school. well I do feel like they do expect certain things of me, but they don't, like, they're not like that they do in a good way, kind of, and they challenge me, but not like, if you don't do this, then this will happen' (Participant 6)

Whereas, one participant specified a source of this reputational pressure being from their parents:

'So my parents would always expect like really, really high grades every single time pushing it further and further and further. And even if you might not like it, they'll still kind of expect you to do that. Because you've already set yourself that high expectation' (Participant 5)

Ethnic/ cultural background

One participant, of Indian origin, described that they thought their ethnic/cultural background brought pressure to be perfect that they seemed to infer was pervasive in their culture, and in some other Asian cultures:

'*Participant 5: like, I mean, I think it's also quite like where you're from as well, because some countries or some ethnic backgrounds might not be as stringent about things as others. Yeah like so some Asians. I am Asian, I am Indian, we kind of prioritise things differently'*

Social media

One participant reported that they thought social media may indirectly influence their level of perfectionism, but implied that this was on a more subconscious level. They implied that on a conscious level they did not perceive a lot of pressure from social media platforms.

'Well, it seems like social media, obviously, they do put pressures on you that you might not realise but in that aspect I don't really feel those pressures as much' (Participant 6)

Parents

As well as being directly communicated by their parents, participants also seemed to feel that their parents' expectations and morals were modelled by their behaviour. This indirect communication seemed to shape participants' behaviour and perceptions of how to behave:

'Yeah and I also think it's kind of like how you're brought up probably. I mean, my parents are both hard working and stuff like that' (participant 2)

'*I think my mum is quite perfectionist. So I'm quite like her.' (Participant 3)*

External reinforcement

Participants reported that they felt that consequential rewards/punishments impacted their tendency to aim for perfection. They reported that this external reward or punishment came from both the home and school context.

Receive external reward

This subtheme linked with the subtheme of 'teachers', and thus the theme of direct communication, as the participant implied that teachers provided external rewards which encouraged their perfectionistic tendency to be the best:

'Yeah I just wanna be the best. Because there's a pleasure beach trip that goes on every year. Oh, yeah. With the amount of rewards you get. Yeah. And the highest you get this five

students and every year, who have the highest rewards go on that trip. And I try and use that as a way to get more rewards and stuff' (Participant 6)

External punishment

This subtheme linked with both subthemes 'teachers' and 'parents', and again the superordinate theme of direct communication. The participant implied that they behaved in a positive way to avoid incurring punishments in the school and home context:

' *RESEARCHER: so we've got parents, teachers, friends, and like almost like reward system?*

Pupil 1: yeah and punishments as well

RESEARCHER: ok like sanctions in school?

Pupil 1: yeah and at home as well you can have things taken off you like cancel your phone contract'

Aspiration for a positive future

This identified theme comprised of two subthemes: 'reaction to perceived societal conditions' and 'investment in future'. Participants seemed to employ that their perception of a achieving a positive future somewhat necessitated their perfectionistic tendencies.

Reaction to perceived societal conditions

One participant reflected on their perception that societal conditions were becoming more competitive and individualistic. They specifically highlight their perception that prices are increasing and so it is necessary to get 'better' job roles:

'I mean, just society, I guess, in general, you have to know, obviously, things becoming more expensive and everything like that. So you need to get better jobs. I don't know if it's harder

now. But obviously, if young people, like prices are more expensive and stuff like that so you need to get a better job. And I think there's more competition.' (Participant 4)

Investment in future

Another participant discussed a recent GCSE assessment which they felt they could have achieved more highly on, inferring that they were unhappy with a 'pass' mark. They go on to discuss that they perceive working harder and investing energy and time in their school years, then this will make their future lives better, including getting a 'good job':

'Yeah. So, in my I've had an English speech, which I've had to do for GCSEs. And, and I didn't do that well, as I could of, I only got a pass. So then I asked my teachers to redo it, because I know I could have done it better. So I was looking when I done she wasn't really engaging it wasn't really a speech was I'm more like reading something out. So I asked to redo it. So because I wanted it to be better, because I know it's going to be my life. Like, if I do if I put down all the hard work in my teenage years at school life, I think I know that my life will be better, when I'm older, so I can get a good job.' (Participant 3)

Personal factors

This theme seemed to capture participants' own highly personal values and experiences. The sub themes that constitute this superordinate theme are: religious faith, compensation for a non-preferred reality, upbringing, self-generated and domain specific.

Religious faith

Although they did not give any further explanation, one participant reported that they felt pressure from God to be perfect.

Compensation for a non-preferred reality

Another participant reported that they engage in perfectionistic behaviours to change an external reality that they did not like. The participant gave a domestic example:

‘not being rude to my family but my family my mom, especially, but she's quite.. She's not messy, but she doesn't.. She's not really OCD so she doesn't like everything to be tidy and she is ok with just the way things are. But for me, it really irritates me. Yeah, I can be messy but then it irritates me so I go back into go back and do it. So my room I just try make sure it's like always tidy in my bathroom I just try clean often at home’ (participant 3)

Upbringing

Some participants reflected that pressures to be perfectionist came from their experiences of their upbringing, focussing largely on the domestic context and immediate family influences:

‘When I'm at home, my Mum, Dad they work seven days a week. So me and my brother we like tidy up the house on the weekend. So when we've got time. So Yeah, we tidy up the house and stuff now. I think that's kind of what's helping me to become nice and tidy things up. Yeah and I also think it’s kind of like how you’re brought up probably. I mean, my parents are both hard working and stuff like that’ (participant 3)

‘So people might see perfectionism is normal in their life. And maybe it’s just like integrated into everything like since they were a kid’ (participant 4)

Self-generated

One participant seemed to imply that their perfectionist tendencies and motivation came from within themselves:

‘yeah and like from your heart. Like you don’t wanna do something but you know you’re gonna have to’ (participant 1)

Domain specific

Some participants qualified their responses to the research question, by explaining that perfectionism was not a blanket approach or pressure for them, rather that they felt the

pressure and thus to be perfect in some domains, but not in others:

'Because I don't feel the need to be perfect in everything' (participant 2)

'it's more like academics for me. I mean appearance isn't such a big thing for me. I mean obviously you want to look nice but I don't get stressed about not looking perfect. But academics for me is the most stressful'(Participant 4)

Peer influence

This superordinate theme included three subthemes: social comparison, precedent set by peers and competition with others. Initially social comparison and competition were two separate sub-themes, but it was decided that there was sufficient overlap in content that they would be amalgamated into one subtheme.

Social Comparison and Competition

Participants discussed the pressure to actively compete and out-perform/achieve other peers. For example one 13 year old participant stated:

'And then I come in school, and say I'm gonna be head boy and then I've got friends who are like 'no, it's gonna be me no, it's gonna be me'. So I feel the pressure from other people to do better than them' (participant 4)

Precedent set by peers

Participants spoke of the positive characteristics/achievements of other peers, and their drive to be like those others:

'and also at school you could be influenced by your peers, like this is linked to what I said before. So their friends may be perfect and stuff so they might be influenced by that. And maybe just trying to be like others' (Participant 2)

Summary

It can be seen from the thematic map that four of the subordinate themes were linked with another subordinate theme from a separate thematic category. The sub theme 'parents' was associated with 'external punishment' as although participants' responses suggested that parents were a source of direct communication to be perfectionistic, they also considered that parents' reinforcement of perfectionistic traits compounded this. Similarly, the sub theme 'teachers' was linked with 'receive external reward' as some participants' considered that teachers directly communicated perfectionistic traits, and also felt that teachers rewarded these, thus positively reinforcing these traits.

Discussion

The discussion considers phase 1 (RQ1) and then phase 2 (RQ2) separately before integrating findings from the study overall (Hirose & Creswell, 2022).

Research question 1: *Is there a relationship between perfectionism and anxiety and depression in secondary aged pupils?*

Significant relationships were detected between participants' scores on SOP-C, and anxiety and depression scores (as in Limburg et al., 2016). The results demonstrate that where SOP-C and SPP are high, so too are depression (Huggins et al., 2008) and anxiety (Hewitt et al., 2002; Limburg et al., 2016), and when SOP-S is high, anxiety is also high to a lesser extent. While there may well be other mediating factors (Starley, 2019) this relationship is important in understanding the experience of CYP in schools. There was a significant relationship found between SPP and age, and although it is not possible to conclude a causal link with this

data, it could be hypothesised that this is a reflection of adolescents' sensitivity to social judgment and peer pressure (Blakemore, 2018).

The three perfectionism components explained 23.4% and 31.5% of the variance in depression and anxiety scores, respectively. When the contributions of the individual perfectionism components were examined, SOP-C scores significantly contributed to both anxiety (as also found by O'Connor et al., 2010) and depression scores, SPP significantly contributed only in the depression model and SOP-S did not contribute significantly to either (supporting findings reported by O'Connor et al., 2010). Thus, in this sample it seems that SOP-C contributed most to both depression and anxiety models, in line with Limburg et al. (2016). SOP-S contributed the least. It is important to note that this sample was non-clinical, and thus perfectionism components contributed to symptoms of psychopathology, not clinically diagnosed psychological conditions.

This is consistent with cognitive models of depression (Beck, 1976) in that self-criticism (SOP-C) constitutes negative views of the self, which could then feed into negative thoughts about the future/the world, resulting in negative emotional experience such as depression.

Research Question 2: *What do CYP think drives perfectionistic tendencies?*

The superordinate themes emerging in response to the above question were: direct/indirect communication, peer influence, personal factors, aspiration for positive future, academic assessment and external reinforcement. The theme of direct communication, specifically the subtheme of parents provides support for the Social Expectations Model (SEM; Hewitt & Flett, 2002), in that the young people describe their parents directly communicating their high expectations to them, which they perceive as a driver of their perfectionistic tendencies. This

partially supports findings by Domocus and Damian (2018), though not entirely as this research was cross sectional, as opposed to longitudinal as their research was.

The sub theme of 'reputation based on past performance' mirrors aforementioned findings by Neumeister et al. (2009). Therefore it may be that when young people achieve highly at a young age, they feel they need to reach match this level of performance in later life.

Integration of phase 1 and phase 2.

This research adds to the current perfectionism literature by demonstrating that, despite the hypothesis that perfectionism may have positive and negative dimensions, it is associated with negative experiences (anxiety and depression) in secondary aged young people. Furthermore it appears that perfectionism directed at the self that is critical (SOP-C) and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) are dominant in this relationship, with striving (SOP – S) not having influence. CYP who show high levels of perfectionism describe numerous drivers for it, which span across socially prescribed drivers consistent with other findings such as the influence of parenting and culture (Walton et al., 2018) as well as those linked to striving, such as hoping to achieve success in life.

The participants' responses include, yet also go beyond, their experiences of being parented, and reach into societal/cultural norms and changes. Thus the wide range of themes emerging from participants' responses suggest that the drivers of perfectionism may be better bound to a model incorporating multiple systems, as Morris and Lomax (2004) do with their eco-systemic model, and with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). In fact, many of the sub/themes link well with levels of Bronfenbrenner's theory, as best represented in Figure 2

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE.

Appraisal of the current study

The first notable strength of this research is that it gathers the perspectives of English secondary school pupils, a subsection of the wider population that is neglected in the perfectionism literature (Starley, 2019). No other available research has gathered the perceptions of UK CYP with regard to where they perceive drivers of perfectionism to originate. Thus, this study makes an important contribution to the perfectionism literature. This research, although not necessarily aiming to be generalised to the wider population of CYP, may give professionals a starting point from which to understand and explore possible pressures on CYP's perfectionistic tendencies.

Secondly, not only is perfectionism research with CYP relatively rare in the research literature, but the use of a perfectionism measure designed specifically for use with CYP is rarer still (O'Connor et al., 2010). The measure used in this research (CAPS) was specifically designed for use with CYP (O'Connor et al., 2009), and thus was appropriate for the participant sample. Indeed, this measure was found to have very good internal consistency in the current study (α= .87). So too, did the measures of emotional distress (α=.90, .93).

The research was conducted in two different English counties and in a number of different towns within those counties, with pupils in a number of different types of secondary school (that is, single sex, grammar, mixed, maintained, and independent).

In terms of limitations the research did not measure OOP, and therefore it could be argued that not all relevant perfectionism dimensions were measured. If another measure was used, such as The Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale- Junior Form (PSPS-J) (Flett et al., 2012),

then SOP, SPP and OOP could have been used. Brevity and accessibility of the online survey was judged to be an important factor so a shorter measure was used.

Many of the participating schools would only consent for pupils in lower year groups to participate in the research (years 7, 8 and 9), due to concerns about older pupils missing vital exam preparation in lessons. Therefore, the data are inevitably skewed toward the lower end of the age range. Although the current study found a small significant correlation between SPP and age, this correlation may have been found to be larger if there was more equal representation of the ages/year groups.

Using self-report measures to select eligible participants for phase two may have been affected by social desirability bias (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960), which Starley (2019) suggests may be especially high in perfectionistic individuals, thus questioning the validity of the responses. Including informant measures (for example, from parents, teachers or friends) may overcome this issue.

Furthermore, the data collection context (participants' respective schools) may have impacted their responses to phase two questions. Many of their responses to research question two seemed to focus on the scholastic domain and academic success.

The participants in this research all attended mainstream schools, therefore the population of CYP attending specialist educational provision were not included.

Recommendations for future research

The current study, and much other perfectionism research, has explored and demonstrated the negative correlates of perfectionism. However some individuals undoubtedly perceive some aspects of perfectionism as positive and adaptive, and this study has also indicated that striving (SOP -S) might be less related to negative outcomes in CYP than self criticism and socially prescribed perfectionism. Without systematic exploration of possible positive

outcomes, our understanding of perfectionism will still be unbalanced. Therefore, research could usefully explore possible positive aspects/outcomes of perfectionistic striving in CYP.

There is an imbalance in the number of studies with adult participants, compared to those with CYP. Ideally, further research would focus on CYP, so that development of perfectionism, and efficacy of early intervention, can be further explored. Additionally, more frequent use of measures designed for use with CYP should be used with this age group. Furthermore, future research could focus on the relationship between perfectionistic traits and particular subgroups of CYP, such as those with autism spectrum condition or other special educational needs.

Many interventions for the negative effects of perfectionism are within-child focussed and often show limited impact, although cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has shown some impact (Abdollahi et al., 2019; Lloyd et al., 2015; Wegerer, 2024). It would be beneficial for future research to explore the elements of school systems that are particularly influential in development of perfectionism tendencies/ protecting against socially prescribed and self-critical aspects of perfectionism in adolescence; for example, do teachers' levels of perfectionism affect perfectionism of their pupils? Such information could help create a framework that may support schools to optimise their staff and pupils' outcomes by making systemic changes.

Implications for EP practice

Starley (2019) effectively sets out the range of work that EPs might be involved in when considering perfectionism. The current findings have a number of implications for professional EP practice that extend and refine the potential work that might be most effective:

Firstly, considering the participants' perceptions on drivers of perfectionism, it may be important for EPs to raise awareness of the role adults can have in contributing to the processes. For example, training for school staff would raise awareness of perfectionism and its correlates, and support teachers in how to identify perfectionistic CYP as it may be helpful to monitor their manifest behaviours to detect negative outcomes that might be associated. Similarly, information sharing aimed at parents/carers when perfectionism is present may provide a coordinated approach to monitoring and supporting CYP. EPs are well placed to advise both parents and teachers on how to discuss perfectionism with CYP, and offer support.

EPs may be able to contribute to a systemic approach to understanding and supporting pupils by advocating for school-wide analysis of the risks of promoting perfectionism, using CYP specific measures of perfectionism with pupils and adult specific ones with staff at a targeted level while being aware of the possibility that school wide approaches potentially increase difficulties, as has been found with mental health difficulties more widely (Foukes et al. 2024).

With regard to intervention, EPs are well placed to develop approaches that might help staff reduce socially prescribed and self-critical aspects of perfectionism, while potentially building on striving as an aspect that is not linked to negative outcomes in the same way. While more research is needed to establish if striving is a positive feature of perfectionism it certainly an area of strength for CYP that seems relatively independent of the more negative consequences. Curriculum considerations and teaching approaches that reduce the likelihood of socially prescribed or self-critical perfectionist thinking could be offered to schools in order to reach a larger number of CYP than relying on 1:1 interventions. As results suggests that SPP may increase with age, approaches might be most relevant to older secondary pupils.

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Table 1

Correlation coefficients for all variables

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1)Depression	1.00				
(2)Anxiety	.703**	1.00			
(3)SOP-S	.105	.228*	1.00		
(4)SOP-C	.403**	.546**	.549**	1.00	
*(5)*SPP	.354**	.283*	.247*	.367**	1.00

**** significant at p= .001, *= significant at p < .05**

Figure 1. Thematic Map.

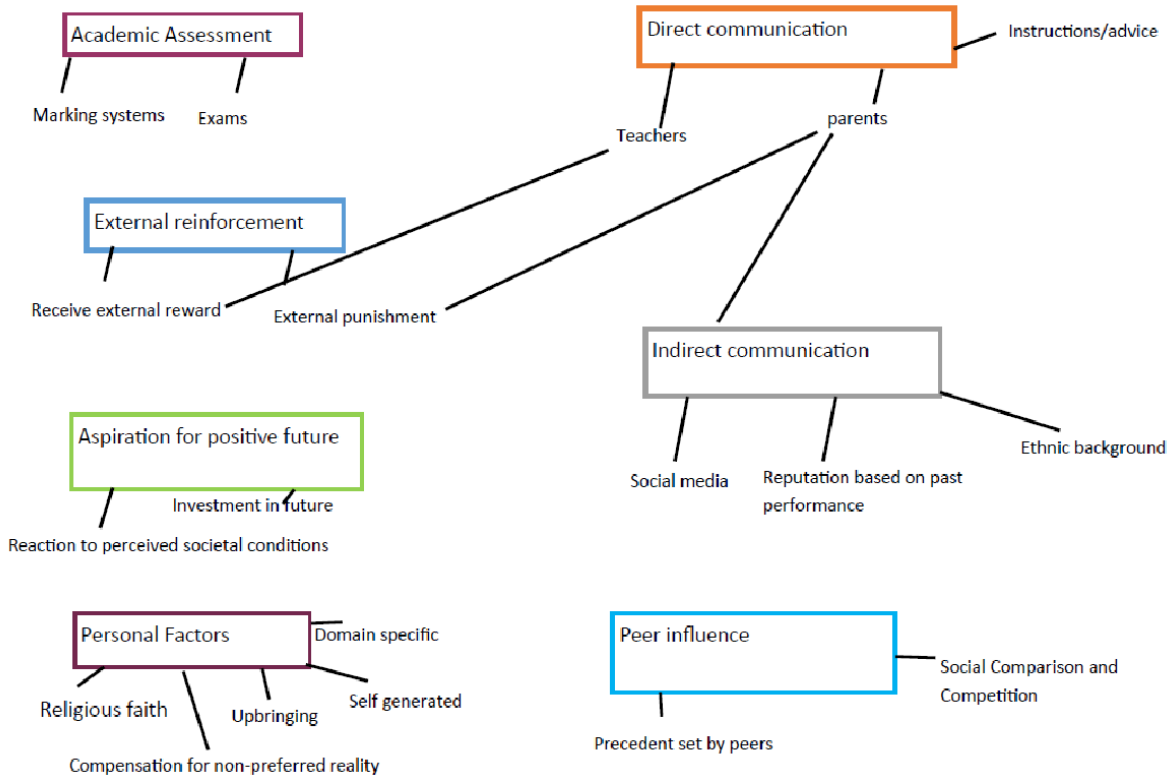
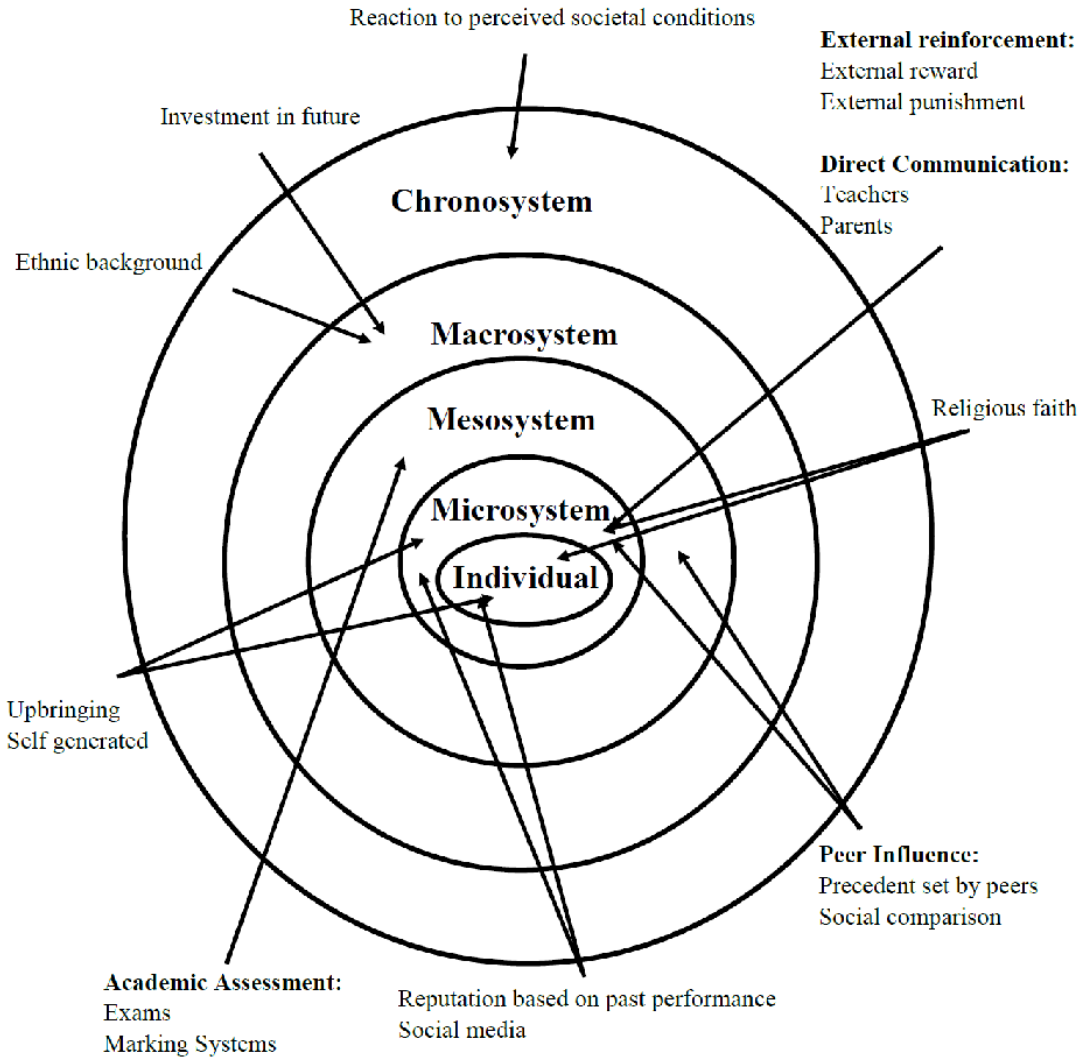


Figure 2. Inclusion of subordinate and superordinate themes onto a pictorial depiction of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).


Reaction to perceived societal conditions
External reinforcement:
External reward
External punishment
Investment in future
Direct Communication:
Teachers
Parents
Chronosystem
Ethnic background
Macrosystem
Mesosystem
Religious faith
Microsystem
Individual
Upbringing
Self generated
Peer Influence:
Precedent set by peers
Social comparison
Academic Assessment:
Exams
Marking Systems
Reputation based on past performance
Social media