



Designing a Conceptual Model of Perfectionism in Gifted Adolescent Girls: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

Adolescence is acknowledged as one of the most pivotal phases of human development, signifying the transition from childhood to adulthood and characterized by significant alterations across cognitive, emotional, social, and physiological spheres. These changes present adolescents with new identity and psychological challenges, significantly influencing their future pathways.

Among the psychological constructs commonly observed during adolescence, perfectionism stands out as a prominent phenomenon. Perfectionism is characterized by an individual's inclination to pursue flawlessness and establish performance standards surpassing realistic abilities, frequently accompanied by inflexible self-evaluations and enduring self-criticism. This disposition is reinforced both internally and externally by exaggerated standards, subjecting an individual to persistent pressure to attain optimal outcomes and to be perceived as the best.

Gifted adolescents, owing to their heightened cognitive capabilities and elevated expectations from families, schools, and society, experience perfectionism with greater intensity and complexity than their peers. This increased exposure renders them more vulnerable to the multifaceted repercussions of the construct. Within this context, the present study focuses specifically on gifted adolescent females demonstrating perfectionistic tendencies, with the objective of examining their lived experiences. This qualitative investigation aimed to reveal nuanced and previously underexplored facets of perfectionism, serving as the foundation for the development of a culturally and contextually grounded conceptual model tailored to this population. The primary research question was: How do gifted, perfectionist adolescent females perceive and experience perfectionism, and what is the structure and nature of the conceptual model developed from these experiences?

Methodology

This research was primarily theoretical in nature and aimed to develop new concepts rather than to empirically validate an existing theory. To obtain precise and richly contextualized local insights for model development, a qualitative approach was employed, with the analysis structured according to grounded theory methodology.

Participants were deliberately chosen from perfectionist, gifted adolescent girls enrolled in secondary schools for the gifted in the cities of Tehran and Karaj during the academic year 2024. Purposeful sampling was based on specific inclusion criteria:

1. Age range spanning from 13 to 18 years.
2. Enrollment in designated gifted schools.
3. A score exceeding the mean on the Hewitt and Flett (1991) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS).
4. Voluntary consent to contribute.
5. Provision of informed consent, adequate time allocation, and readiness to participate

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actively in interviews.

Sampling initially employed purposive selection and subsequently continued through theoretical sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved — the stage at which no additional categories or codes arose from the data. Ultimately, a total of 13 participants were included.

Data collection entailed administering the Hewitt and Flett Perfectionism Questionnaire in conjunction with conducting semi-structured interviews. Following verbatim transcription of interviews, data analysis was conducted utilizing Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory coding procedures (open, axial, and selective coding). This process resulted in the identification of the primary category and facilitated the development of an integrated conceptual model.

Findings

The primary category identified through the analysis was: "Pursuit of self-worth and alignment with an identity centered on cognitive ability." This phenomenon functions within a dynamic, multi-level cycle that integrates contextual, causal, intervening, strategic, and consequential factors.

1. Causal Factors

Four main categories were delineated: personal, familial, social, and educational. Individual traits encompassed a pronounced motivation to achieve excellence universally, heightened sensitivity to imperfection, an obsessive focus on outcomes, a requirement for complete control, and a relentless pursuit of optimal results within a limited timeframe.

Familial influences encompassed heightened parental expectations, especially in families where academic achievement is equated with personal value, coupled with ongoing comparisons to peers and a desire for recognition and external validation.

Social elements were defined by relative peer interactions.

Educational features included competitive school environments, regular assessments, ranking systems, sensitivity to grades, preparation for major competitive examinations (such as university entrance exams), and using performance metrics as indicators of excellence. These reinforced and sustained tendencies toward perfectionism.

2. Contextual Factors

Two categories influenced the trajectory and nature of perfectionistic efforts via cultural and media influences.

Broader cultural norms associated personal worth with observable external accomplishments.

Social media fulfilled two primary functions: encouraging self-improvement and fostering continuous comparison, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy.

Intervening Factors

Elements that moderate or amplify the causal or contextual influences were identified in: Family support, encompassing constructive reinforcement and consistent encouragement throughout the learning journey.

Coping skills: Adolescents who possess effective stress-management techniques and embrace failure as an integral aspect of development may transform maladaptive perfectionism into a more adaptive perspective.

3. Strategies

Two principal strategic categories arose as responses within the aforementioned conditions: Achievement-oriented strategies: Properly harnessed, these fostered enhanced performance, continual learning, and self-efficacy.

Avoidance/Protection-oriented strategies: Driven largely by fear of failure and diminished self-worth; these provoked inefficiency, mental exhaustion, procrastination, and disengagement.

4. Consequences

Positive outcomes encompassed short-term academic achievement, acquisition of competitive roles, enhanced self-confidence and self-efficacy, and sustained motivation through consistent goal attainment.

Negative outcomes included reliance on external validation, continual escalation of standards, persistent psychological stress, intense anxiety, self-criticism, feelings of worthlessness, melancholy, sadness, mental exhaustion, and procrastination.

Conclusion

The integrated model illustrates that perfectionism in gifted adolescents is not a static personality trait but rather a social-cognitive construct fundamentally embedded within social, cultural, familial, and educational environments. Compared to the perfectionism model proposed by Hewitt and Flett, gifted females demonstrated elevated levels of the first and third dimensions of perfectionism, as they regarded themselves as possessing abilities and competencies that may not be commonly found in others. The theoretical implications highlight the convergence of three fundamental systems:

1. Cultural-Media System: Connects self-worth to measurable, external accomplishments, particularly for individuals with high intelligence and advanced cognitive skills.
2. Family-Individual System: Family-Individual System: Elevated parental expectations associated with the adolescent's exceptional abilities foster an internalized self-critical observer.
3. Competitive Educational System: Examination-focused frameworks and ranking criteria associate adolescent's identity and sense of achievement closely with academic performance.

These systems collectively activate psychological mechanisms that uphold perfectionism, thereby reinforcing the adolescent's motivation to derive self-worth from aligning personal identity with exceptional cognitive abilities —primarily via academic success. Within this framework, the development of self-worth takes place through social comparison, external recognition, high achievement, and esteemed academic placements, rather than through self-acceptance or intrinsic personal development. Given this dynamic, exceptional students are inevitably subjected to increased expectations from both internal and external sources. Although such pressures may lead to scholastic improvement, they also pose substantial risks of psychological harm. The study consequently advocates for families and educational institutions to reevaluate the educational and developmental expectations assigned to gifted students. Education systems embrace comprehensive approaches, emphasizing multi-dimensional personal development beyond mere cognitive accomplishments. The development of customized educational and support frameworks for exceptional adolescents is strongly advocated.

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