

The Importance of Perfectionism to Chinese International Students and How This Affects Their Emotional and Mental Health

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Abstract: This study adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on the mechanisms through which perfectionism affects the emotional and mental health of Chinese international students in the UK. Through in-depth interviews with three Chinese students and using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), three core themes of perfectionism manifestation were identified: unconscious patterns of perfectionist behavior, the shaping role of others and the social environment on perfectionism, and the complex impact of the experience of being an “outsider” in a cross-cultural context on perfectionist psychology.

Keywords: Perfectionism; Chinese international students; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Emotional well-being; Cultural adaptation; Psychological intervention

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism, as a multidimensional psychological concept, is typically defined as an individual’s tendency to set exceedingly high standards accompanied by harsh self-evaluations ^[1]. In high-pressure academic and cultural environments, Chinese international students are particularly prone to exhibiting varying degrees of perfectionist characteristics, which profoundly impact their emotional state, psychological adaptation, and academic achievement. Based on a constructivist paradigm, this study uses in-depth interviews and interpretive analysis to reveal the inner experiences and psychological meaning of perfectionism among Chinese students studying in the UK, thereby addressing the neglect of individual experience in existing quantitative research.

2. Literature review

The theory of perfectionism has evolved since the 1990s. Frost et al. proposed dividing perfectionism into two

dimensions: Concern over Mistakes and Personal Standards ^[2]. Later, Stoeber and Otto further clarified its two-factor structure: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. The former is often associated with positive outcomes such as high achievement motivation, while the latter is more involved in psychological distress such as anxiety and depression ^[3].

Hewitt and Flett, from an interpersonal perspective, divided perfectionism into self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed types, particularly pointing out that socially prescribed perfectionism tends to be prominent in cultures emphasizing collectivism. Among Chinese international students, family and social expectations often become the primary external sources of perfectionism ^[4]. Furthermore, the interaction between acculturative stress and perfectionism has been shown to significantly affect individuals' mental health levels ^[5].

Current research mostly uses quantitative methods to examine the correlation between perfectionism and various psychological variables, lacking qualitative exploration starting from individual experience to explore its meaning-making process. Therefore, this study utilizes Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to extract the experiential structure and dynamic changes of perfectionism from the narratives of international students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) within qualitative research, committed to capturing participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of the meaning of perfectionism. This method emphasizes exploring complex, multidimensional psychological phenomena closely related to cultural background through semi-structured interviews into the individual's world.

3.2. Participants

The study used purposive sampling to select three Chinese international students in the UK, including both males and females, all in their first year of study, and self-identifying as having perfectionist tendencies. All participants signed informed consent forms, ensuring their anonymity and data confidentiality.

3.3. Data collection

Each participant underwent one semi-structured online interview lasting approximately 30–50 minutes. Questions covered the sources of perfectionism, specific manifestations, emotional experiences, and cultural adaptation experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis followed the standard IPA process as guided by Smith and Osborn, including repeated reading of the text, making initial notes, identifying experiential themes, seeking connections between themes, and finally integrating them into superordinate themes ^[6]. The process emphasized the dialogue between the researcher and the text and reflection to capture implicit meanings and emotional dimensions in the narratives.

4. Findings

In this study, three Chinese international students in the UK were interviewed as participants, each showing different experiences and understandings of perfectionism. Participant A manifested perfectionism in appearance

anxiety, often using makeup, clothing, and photography to conceal perceived flaws in her appearance. She enjoyed the process of dressing up but was also troubled by her inability to meet self-expectations. Participant B initially denied his own perfectionism but gradually realized during the interview that he had extremely high self-demands accompanied by persistent self-criticism. He gained a sense of security from this criticism, viewing it as a form of self-acceptance. Participant C was clearly aware of her exacting demands on herself academically, stemming from parental expectations and social evaluation. Although external pressures decreased after coming to the UK, she still felt pain due to her self-set high standards, which was even affecting her sleep and eating.

Through interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interview content, three important themes were extracted.

4.1. Theme 1: The unconscious nature of perfectionism and self-discovery

Participant A initially denied being a perfectionist, claiming she “just feel(s) like I’m kinda taking things as they come in most ways”, but later described an almost obsessive preparation process for taking photos—she found it both enjoyable and painful. Further exploration led her to realize these behaviors were actually to cover up appearance flaws, and she thus became aware that her perfectionism was closely related to appearance anxiety. She said: “I didn’t think it was that important to me before, but it actually takes up a big part of your life.”

Participant B similarly showed an ambivalent attitude. At the beginning of the interview, he displayed great confidence in his own abilities until he was asked, “Why did you ask to take part in this study on perfectionism?” when self-doubt emerged. He mentioned often being demanding of others, thinking he was “mean.” As the interview progressed, he engaged in persistent self-criticism, expressing dissatisfaction with almost every word and deed, yet was unaware that this pattern constituted perfectionist behavior. Only when pointed out did he reflect in surprise: “I didn’t even know, I was reflecting on myself, oh, is this some kind of psychological phenomenon?” This tendency for individuals with higher levels of self-critical perfectionism to engage in avoidant coping hinders their ability to use other, more adaptive coping strategies and to escape the distress associated with stressful situations^[7].

Unlike A and B, participant C was clearly aware of her perfectionism and described it as “ingrained.” She indicated that this demand always accompanied her, regardless of environmental changes. What troubled her was not only the high standards themselves but also her persistent self-awareness of them.

4.2. Theme 2: The dual role of others’ evaluations and social support

All participants emphasized the central role of others’ evaluations and social support in the formation and maintenance of perfectionism, but the content and manner of influence differed for each.

Participant A received support from her family, especially her mother, such as financial assistance and emotional approval, which allowed her to maintain a degree of confidence while facing appearance anxiety. Simultaneously, peer influence was significant—she desired to fit into the group, gaining peer recognition through external appearance. She mentioned that in China’s collectivist culture, she did not want to be a maverick and instead hoped to feel safe within groups sharing common interests.

Participant B, on the other hand, established his self-worth through others’ dependence. He stated that only when helping others and feeling needed could he alleviate his self-criticism. His perfectionism was more referenced against others, seeking temporary psychological balance by playing expected roles.

Participant C was long influenced by parental expectations and peer pressure, deeply trapped in the psychological dilemma of “conditional positive regard”. Any failures and mistakes could lead to their parents

withdrawing their love. She believed that only by meeting external standards could she gain love and acceptance. Additionally, comparisons among peers further deepened her anxiety and frustration. Unlike A and B, C struggled to obtain sufficient support from the outside world and constantly sought the researcher's approval during the interview, reflecting her unmet need for validation.

4.3. Theme 3: The “outsider” identity and the reconfiguration of perfectionism

All three mentioned how their experience of being an “outsider” in the UK impacted their perfectionism. As they planned to return to China after their studies, they viewed their time in the UK as a temporary experience, which brought a relaxing effect on their behavior and psychology.

A felt “allowed to do anything” in the UK because no one knew her past, reducing external judgment pressure. She described this period as a “long holiday”, freeing her from the pressure to fit in and allowing her to explore her interests in clothing and photography more freely.

B also experienced a sense of freedom, but accompanied by anxiety about losing control. He enjoyed the more flexible schedule but felt guilty due to relaxed self-discipline, even exhibiting emotionally out-of-control behaviors. This reveals the tension between self-discipline and release faced by perfectionists in environments lacking structure.

C felt a shift from being externally driven to internally driven. Away from parental and social comparisons, she focused more on her own standards, and her anxiety decreased somewhat. However, she remained aware that perfectionism had been internalized as part of her personality, still dominating her goal-setting and self-evaluation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study resonate with existing theories but also offer breakthroughs. The unconscious nature of perfectionism is highly related to the perfectionistic self-presentation strategies proposed by Hewitt et al., where individuals often hide imperfections to avoid social blame. The buffering effect of social support on perfectionism corroborates Sirois and Molnar's discussion on “adaptive perfectionism”, where whether one possesses resilience and self-compassion alongside high standards is key to affecting mental health ^[8].

The psychological distance brought by the “outsider” identity provided participants with an opportunity to re-examine and even reconfigure their perfectionism. This is consistent with Zhang et al.'s view that “Environmental transformation can serve as an opportunity for cognitive restructuring” ^[9]. It suggests that consciously utilizing the transition phase of cultural context in psychological counseling and educational support may help individuals transition from maladaptive to adaptive manifestations of perfectionism.

This study also has limitations, such as a small sample size and reliance on self-report data. Future research could expand sample diversity and incorporate longitudinal designs to track the dynamic changes of perfectionism during the study abroad process.

6. Conclusion and implications

Perfectionism manifests complexly among Chinese international students in the UK. It can be both a warning sign of psychological risk and a driving force for pursuing excellence. Its development is deeply influenced by individual self-awareness, social support, and cultural environment. For perfectionists, perfectionism is part of the self that makes them suffer, but they do not want it to disappear completely. They do not hate their perfectionism

as much as I thought they would at first; they have perfectionism as part of their personality, part of their ego, which they feel painful and enjoyable at the same time. They enjoy the sense of achievement that perfectionism gives them, while suffering the anxiety and pain that go hand in hand with perfectionism.

University international student support services could add psychoeducational workshops on perfectionism, recruiting and training senior Chinese students to serve as “perfectionism cognition mentors.” Through regular group discussions and one-on-one conversations, they could help new students analyze the sources and impacts of their own perfectionist tendencies, enhancing self-awareness and emotional regulation skills. Psychological counselors can introduce cognitive restructuring techniques into cross-cultural adaptation counseling to help students distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. Future research could further explore the specific mechanisms of family communication patterns and cultural values in the formation of perfectionism, and conduct longitudinal studies on the developmental trajectory of perfectionism, tracking changes from pre-departure through different stages of studying abroad to identify critical turning points and influencing factors in the cultural adaptation process.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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