

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Socially Prescribed Perfectionism among Sri Lankan Adolescents: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

Ridma Ekanayake^{1*}, Lakmal Ponnampereuma¹

¹*School of Psychology, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), Malabe, 10115, Sri Lanka*

Corresponding author*: ridmaekanayake22@gmail.com

Abstract

Socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP) is defined as the belief that others demand perfection from them. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to SPP due to their heightened sensitivity to external evaluations. Existing literature has consistently identified SPP as the most harmful form of perfectionism. However, there is a notable lack of research focusing specifically on SPP, both globally and in Sri Lanka. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Sri Lankan adolescents with SPP by focusing on how they make sense of external expectations and the resulting psychological impact. The sample included seven adolescents aged 17 to 19 who self-identified as perfectionists experiencing unrealistic expectations from others. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling via a social media post. Data was collected through semi-structured online interviews, each lasting between 30 and 50 minutes. The interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The superordinate theme, 'the price of never feeling enough', and its three subthemes illustrated the psychological impact of SPP, highlighting participants' experiences of self-doubt, strained relationships, and identity loss. This study supports global literature by identifying SPP as predominantly maladaptive, with only limited adaptive aspects. Sri Lankan adolescents appear to experience intense psychological pressure, largely driven by unrealistic expectations from significant adult figures.

Keywords: Socially prescribed perfectionism, perfectionism, unrealistic expectations, adolescents

Introduction

Perfectionism is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct, characterized by the pursuit of flawlessness, the setting of exceptionally high personal standards, and overly critical self-evaluations (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Hewitt and Flett (1991) proposed three dimensions of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), where individuals demand perfection from themselves; other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), where they expect it from others; and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP), which refers to the belief that others impose perfectionistic expectations on the individual. This study focuses on SPP, a form characterized by heightened sensitivity to perceived expectations and evaluations from others.

SPP has been increasingly recognised as a major concern among younger populations, with recent findings indicating a 30% rise in the past decade (Curran & Hill, 2019). Molnar et al. (2023) further reported that one in four adolescents experience chronic external pressure to meet perfectionistic standards. Taken together, these findings suggest that adolescents, already vulnerable to social comparison and approval-seeking, may be particularly susceptible to unrealistic expectations.

In comparison to SOP and OOP, SPP has been more consistently linked to maladaptive psychological outcomes. These effects are particularly pronounced in academic settings, where adolescents often experience heightened stress, test anxiety and burnout driven by a fear of failure to meet unrealistic expectations (Madigan, 2019). However, recent evidence from Zhou et al. (2024) challenges this by highlighting that some adolescents high in SPP actively employed problem-solving strategies to cope with academic pressures, which in turn reduced its adverse effects. This contradicts earlier research and indicates that, under certain conditions, SPP may function not only as a psychological risk factor but also as a potential source of motivation for achievement. Additionally, SPP has increasingly been recognized as a “growing public health concern” requiring urgent attention (Flett et al., 2022). Unlike SOP and OOP, SPP has been consistently associated with more severe psychological outcomes, including suicidal ideation and increased suicide attempts. Supporting this, a meta-analysis by Smith et al. (2018) found that such findings were mainly attributed to the heightened feelings of helplessness, social disconnection and lack of perceived support often reported in SPP. Beyond this, several meta-analyses have also shown strong associations between SPP and a range of psychopathologies including anxiety, depression and eating disorders (Curran & Hill, 2019; Molnar et al., 2023). However, while SPP is often highlighted as detrimental, Limberg et al. (2017) reported that all three dimensions were associated with psychological distress. Therefore, although each dimension may contribute to negative psychological outcomes, SPP appears to be comparatively more detrimental.

The Perfectionism Social Disconnection Model (PSDM; Hewitt et al., 2006) has been widely applied in previous research to understand SPP (Curran & Hill, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). The model explains how SPP shapes both personal and social processes, with individuals closely monitoring their behaviour and responding attentively to others’ feedback. Thereby influencing internal experiences and social interactions (Flett et al., 2022). The PSDM was employed as the theoretical framework in this study to interpret participants’ experiences, capturing both the psychological impact of SPP and the social context that shapes these experiences. To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, no published studies have examined perfectionism or its dimensions in the Sri Lankan context. While some research on adolescents has explored related constructs such as external expectations and social pressure (Pathirana, 2014; Samaranyake & Takemura, 2019), none have directly addressed perfectionism. Consequently, it is not appropriate to generalise the high expectations faced by Sri Lankan adolescents as equivalent to SPP. This highlights a significant gap in the Sri Lankan literature, alongside a broader lack of global research focusing specifically on the SPP dimension. The present study aims to address these gaps by employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore experiences of adolescents with SPP. Accordingly, the research question of this study is: How do Sri Lankan adolescents experience and make sense of SPP? While the original study identified three superordinate themes, this paper focuses on a single theme to allow for an in-depth discussion.

Materials and methods

The present study adopted a qualitative research design, with semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Data were analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 2009), which enables an in-depth exploration of how participants made sense of their experiences with SPP. Purposive sampling was used

to recruit seven Sri Lankan adolescents (3 males, 4 females), aged 17 to 19, who self-identified as high achievers experiencing unrealistic expectations from others. The term “high achievers” was intentionally used instead of “perfectionists” to maintain a neutral, non-judgmental tone and avoid bias. This approach aligns with Madigan (2019), who recognised perfectionists as often high-performing individuals. Recruitment was conducted via a bilingual poster (Sinhala and English) shared on social media platforms including WhatsApp, Instagram, and LinkedIn. The study commenced following ethical approval granted by the SLIIT Ethics Review Committee on behalf of Liverpool John Moores University. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and lasted 30 to 50 minutes. They were carried out in either English or Sinhala, based on participants’ preference. Participants were encouraged, but not required, to keep their cameras on to aid the interpretation of non-verbal cues, consistent with the interpretative nature of IPA. An interview guide was developed in English and translated into Sinhala when required. It included open-ended questions aligned with the study’s objectives, as well as basic demographic questions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Sinhala transcripts were translated into English to support analysis. Data were analyzed using Smith et al.’s (2009) guidelines for IPA, with particular attention to the double hermeneutic process.

The British Psychological Society’s Code of Ethics 2021 was followed, ensuring participant confidentiality and data security. Informed consent was collected digitally, including parental consent for participants under 18. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage, and all data were securely stored in password protected files. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all participants. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic and the age of participants, counselling support contacts were included in the debriefing material.

Results

Participants’ construction of a “perfect self” was primarily shaped by the expectations of significant others, particularly parents, followed by grandparents, teachers, and broader sociocultural norms. For adolescents, academic achievement was the central source of pressure, with the expectation to attain 9As at the Ordinary Level examination emerging as the most recurrent and distressing trigger of SPP. Comparisons with peers and high-achieving siblings further intensified this pressure. The superordinate theme, ‘The price of never feeling enough’, captured the psychological impact and internal struggles arising from these sources. The first subtheme, ‘Can I do it?’ explored feelings of self-doubt and the persistent fear of being perceived as a disappointment by others. The second subtheme, ‘support as a double-edged sword’, captured the tension within relationships. Finally, ‘a self not my own’ explored the participants’ experiences of losing their sense of identity in their efforts to conform to others’ ideals of perfection.

“Can I do it?”

As adolescents, their achievements were predominantly academic, with many maintaining outstanding academic records. However, while they took pride in these accomplishments, they also described the fear of not meeting others’ expectations. For most participants, the most frequent source of expectations of perfection came from parents, which often led to persistent self-doubt. Ruwini mentioned how she constantly doubted her abilities: *“Even if it’s easy I’m like..can I do it...I think not”*. For many participants, the fear of being perceived as anything less than perfect became a significant emotional burden. This fear was so profound that participants expressed how revealing their vulnerabilities or showing any signs of imperfection felt like a source of disappointment, both for themselves and for those around them. As participants noted:

"...my friends saw that I was upset that's what made me feel sad actually... (loud sigh) that they got better marks but I didn't... they can see it also" (Neha)

"I tried to get the grades that they were expecting so yeah, I just came to think that I had to do well to make them think that I was smart (laughter)" (Kara)

Support as a double-edged sword

For many participants, parental support was often intertwined with expectations, making it difficult to feel reassured by their words. While parents offered encouragement, their body language or indirect remarks subtly conveyed an unspoken standard of success. As Kusal reported: *"I can sense it because like after all those are my parents so I can sense like the way they feel"*. Some participants also mentioned that due to this conflicting nature of their support, they did not have a good relationship with their parents. Mihiri explained how she felt disconnected with her mother due to a lack of understanding:

"It's sad because I only have a mother, and when she's not even understanding me...but she's not a bad person... she's doing everything for me".

While participants acknowledged the encouragement and assistance they received from significant others, this support was rarely unconditional. This duality meant that support was not always a source of comfort but sometimes an additional weight to carry.

A self not my own

This subtheme highlighted the loss of authenticity as participants attempted to maintain a flawless image. In striving to meet others' standards, many felt a growing disconnect from their true selves. Lohan stated: *"I have no chance for my feelings and stuff"*. Similarly, Ruwini spoke of having to suppress her own grief to maintain the role expected of her: *"They expected me to be the person in the house but... I'm just a 17-year-old kid who just lost their grandfather."* Mihiri's narrative offered a powerful reflection of this identity conflict:

"I started to feel that my satisfaction with my life... I was not feeling comfortable with myself. It's like I was not listening to myself... I'm not connecting to myself... it's not me anymore."

Discussion

The findings of the present study align with a significant body of research indicating that SPP is predominantly maladaptive (Curran & Hill, 2019; Flett et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2018). Adolescents in this study expressed persistent feelings of inadequacy and a belief that no achievement was ever sufficient. These feelings reflect key elements of SPP, namely the internalization of external expectations and the pervasive fear of failure (Limberg et al., 2017). While these findings are consistent with existing literature, they provide deeper insight into how SPP manifests specifically within Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the study also emphasized feelings of helplessness and alienation, with many participants reporting that they struggled to be accepted for who they truly were. These experiences contribute to the growing body of literature that links SPP to increased risk for emotional distress, alienation, and social isolation (Curran & Hill 2019; Smith et al., 2018). Moreover, this study builds upon existing theoretical frameworks such as the PSDM by Hewitt et al. (2006), which suggests that SPP is linked to emotional alienation and distress. The

results of the present study support this model, showing that adolescents with SPP experience significant distress as they struggle to meet unrealistic standards set by key figures in their lives, particularly family members. The notion that participants strive for perfection to earn approval, yet find themselves trapped in a cycle of inadequacy, reinforces the PSDM's assertion that SPP is fundamentally linked to the inability to accept oneself without meeting externally imposed standards.

A critical aspect of these internalized pressures was the conditional nature of support perceived by participants, particularly from their family members. This conditionality of affection led to difficulties in maintaining social connections, further supporting findings from Flett et al. (2022) and Molnar et al. (2023) that SPP is associated with social difficulties and maladaptive interpersonal outcomes. Interestingly, while participants acknowledged this pressure, none of them expressed resentment or negative feelings towards family members. This insight supports Curran and Hill's (2019) view that the fear of disappointing key figures is central to the emotional distress associated with SPP.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. Although the term "high achievers" is commonly associated with perfectionism research, not all high achievers are perfectionists, and not all perfectionists perform well. This distinction is important, as assuming a direct link may have shaped the interpretation of participants' narratives. Additionally, participants self-identified as experiencing perfectionistic tendencies without formal diagnostic screening, which may have introduced variability in the nature and severity of their traits. Finally, due to the multidimensional nature of perfectionism, some participants also exhibited characteristics of SOP. This overlap highlights the complexity of isolating perfectionism into a single category.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Sri Lankan adolescents with SPP, with this paper specifically examining its psychological impact. While a few adaptive elements were noted, the findings predominantly underscore the maladaptive nature of SPP, reinforcing its relevance not just as an individual concern but as a broader public health issue. The study highlights SPP as a pressing and under-recognised challenge in the Sri Lankan context, where adolescents face intense, externally driven pressures in their daily lives. These findings call for further research focusing on school-going adolescents to better understand the origins and internalisation of such expectations. Additionally, there is an urgent need to implement school-based support systems, particularly for students lacking strong familial support.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to this study. Special thanks are extended to the young participants who made this research possible.

References

- Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2019). Perfectionism is increasing over time: A meta-analysis of birth cohort differences from 1989 to 2016. *Psychological Bulletin*, 145(4), 410–429.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/BUL0000138>

- Flett, G. L., Hewitt, P. L., Nepon, T., Sherry, S. B., & Smith, M. (2022). The destructiveness and public health significance of socially prescribed perfectionism: A review, analysis, and conceptual extension. *Clinical Psychology Review, 93*, 102130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CPR.2022.102130>
- Frost, R. O., Marten, P., Lahart, C., & Rosenblate, R. (1990). The dimensions of perfectionism. *Cognitive Therapy and Research, 14*(5), 449–468. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01172967/METRICS>
- Hewitt, P. L., Flett, G. L., Sherry, S. B., & Caelian, C. (2006). Trait perfectionism dimensions and suicidal behavior. In T. E. Ellis (Ed.), *Cognition and suicide: Theory, research, and therapy* (pp. 215–235). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11377-010>
- Hewitt, P. L., & Flett, G. L. (1991). Perfectionism in the self and social contexts: conceptualization, assessment, and association with psychopathology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60*(3), 456–470. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.60.3.456>
- Limburg, K., Watson, H. J., Hagger, M. S., & Egan, S. J. (2017). The Relationship Between Perfectionism and Psychopathology: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 73*(10), 1301–1326. <https://doi.org/10.1002/JCLP.22435>
- Madigan, D. J. (2019). A Meta-Analysis of Perfectionism and Academic Achievement. *Educational Psychology Review, 31*(4), 967–989. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10648-019-09484-2/METRICS>
- Molnar, D. S., Blackburn, M., Tacuri, N., Zinga, D., Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2023). “I Need to Be Perfect or Else the World’s Gonna End”: A Qualitative Analysis of Adolescent Perfectionists’ Expression and Understanding of Their Perfectionism. *Canadian Psychology, 64*(4), 320–334. <https://doi.org/10.1037/CAP0000357>
- Pathirana, B. D. (2014). Exploring the Sri Lankan adolescents’ relationships with their parents, siblings and peers: An exploratory study. *International Journal of Research in Management & Social Science, 5*.
- Samaranayake, S. U., & Takemura, T. (2019). Does Perceived Social Pressure Play a Vital Role in Emerging Adults’ Future Multiple Role Balance? Evidence from Sri Lanka. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480719887923>
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, research*. Sage.
- Smith, M. M., Sherry, S. B., Chen, S., Saklofske, D. H., Mushquash, C., Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2018). The perniciousness of perfectionism: A meta-analytic review of the perfectionism-suicide relationship. *Journal of Personality, 86*(3), 522–542. <https://doi.org/10.1111/JOPY.12333>
- Zhou, Y., Chen, S., Zhang, Y., Yang, Y., & Guo, C. (2024). Socially Prescribed Perfectionism and Depression: Roles of Academic Pressure and Hope. *School Mental Health, 16*(2), 518–529. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S12310-024-09655-9/FIGURES/2>