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Original Article

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Perfectionist Adolescents to Develop a Framework for Designing Dialectical Behavior Therapy-Based Interventions: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of perfectionist adolescents in order to provide a phenomenologically grounded basis for designing Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)-based interventions tailored to their psychological and developmental needs. A qualitative research approach was adopted using a descriptive phenomenological methodology. The study population comprised male junior high school students in Falavarjan County, Iran, during the 2021 academic year. Using purposive sampling based on predefined inclusion criteria, 20 male adolescents aged 13–16 years who demonstrated salient perfectionistic characteristics during the initial screening process were selected. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews designed to elicit participants' perceptions, emotions, thoughts, interpersonal experiences, and behavioral responses associated with perfectionism. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method, which involved extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing them into thematic structures, and integrating the findings into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon. The analysis resulted in six main themes, 13 first-level subthemes, and 28 second-level subthemes, reflecting the multidimensional nature of perfectionistic experiences during adolescence. The findings indicated that perfectionism extends beyond the pursuit of high standards and is intertwined with adolescents' emotional, cognitive, academic, interpersonal, and personal experiences. Participants' experiences revealed patterns involving heightened self-evaluation, fear of failure and negative evaluation, emotional distress, pressure related to academic and personal performance, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and challenges in self-acceptance and emotion regulation.

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These dimensions highlight the complex interaction between perfectionistic cognitions, emotional vulnerability, behavioral responses, and interpersonal functioning during a critical developmental period. The findings provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subjective experience of adolescent perfectionism and identify clinically relevant domains that can be incorporated into DBT-based intervention frameworks. In particular, the results underscore the potential relevance of core DBT components, including emotion regulation, distress tolerance, mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, and acceptance-oriented skills, for addressing the psychological and behavioral difficulties associated with perfectionism. Overall, the study provides a phenomenological foundation for developing developmentally appropriate and experience-informed therapeutic interventions aimed at reducing maladaptive perfectionistic patterns and promoting psychological adjustment among adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescents; Lived experience; Perfectionism; Phenomenology; Qualitative research.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Perfectionism is recognized as one of the most influential psychological characteristics during adolescence, a developmental period marked by profound cognitive, emotional, and social changes. Although perfectionism may motivate adolescents to pursue achievement and high standards, maladaptive perfectionism is associated with a wide range of adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, emotional distress, fear of failure, low self-esteem, interpersonal difficulties, and reduced psychological well-being. Adolescents with perfectionistic tendencies often experience excessive self-criticism, unrealistic expectations, and persistent dissatisfaction with their performance, making them particularly vulnerable to psychological maladjustment. Despite the growing body of quantitative research on perfectionism, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how adolescents themselves perceive and experience perfectionism in their everyday lives. Quantitative studies provide valuable information regarding the relationships between perfectionism and psychological variables; however, they are limited in their ability to reveal the subjective meanings, emotions, and personal interpretations underlying this phenomenon. A phenomenological perspective enables researchers to explore individuals' lived experiences and gain a deeper understanding of how perfectionism is constructed, experienced, and interpreted within adolescents' personal and social contexts.

Understanding adolescents' lived experiences can provide valuable insights for mental health professionals, school counselors, psychologists, and educators seeking to design interventions that address the unique psychological needs of perfectionist adolescents. Therefore, the present study

aimed to explore the lived experiences of perfectionist adolescents using a phenomenological approach.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design based on descriptive phenomenology. The study population consisted of male junior high school students in Falavarjan County, Isfahan Province, Iran, during the 2021 academic year. Participants were selected through purposive sampling following an initial screening process to identify adolescents with perfectionistic characteristics. Twenty male adolescents aged 13–16 years participated in the study. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring that no substantially new information emerged from additional interviews. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that encouraged participants to describe their personal experiences, feelings, beliefs, and perceptions regarding perfectionism in various aspects of their daily lives. Each interview was conducted individually in a confidential setting, allowing participants to freely express their experiences. The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method. This analytical procedure involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, organization of meanings into thematic clusters, development of exhaustive descriptions, identification of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and validation of the findings through participant verification. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were considered throughout the research process.

Results

Analysis of the interview data resulted in six main themes, thirteen first-level subthemes, and twenty-eight second-level subthemes that collectively described the lived experiences of perfectionist adolescents. The six main themes included self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, well-being, interpersonal relationships, and leisure time. These themes illustrated that perfectionism extended beyond academic achievement and influenced multiple dimensions of adolescents' psychological and social functioning. Participants described constant self-monitoring, fear of making mistakes, unrealistic personal expectations, and persistent dissatisfaction with their achievements. Many adolescents reported experiencing intense pressure to meet both their own standards and those imposed by parents, teachers, and peers. Feelings of anxiety, frustration, emotional exhaustion, and fear of negative evaluation emerged as common experiences. The findings also indicated that perfectionism influenced interpersonal relationships by increasing sensitivity to criticism, reducing emotional expression, and creating difficulties in

establishing satisfying social interactions. Furthermore, participants reported that perfectionistic concerns negatively affected their enjoyment of leisure activities, as they frequently viewed recreational experiences through the lens of achievement and performance rather than relaxation and enjoyment. Overall, the findings demonstrated that perfectionism is a multidimensional psychological phenomenon that shapes adolescents' cognitive, emotional, behavioral, academic, and interpersonal experiences.

Discussion

The findings indicate that perfectionism should not be regarded merely as a personality characteristic related to academic achievement; rather, it represents a pervasive psychological experience that influences multiple domains of adolescents' lives. The participants' narratives revealed that perfectionistic tendencies are closely associated with continuous self-evaluation, fear of failure, emotional vulnerability, and difficulties in social functioning. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that maladaptive perfectionism contributes to psychological distress and interferes with healthy emotional development during adolescence. By employing a phenomenological approach, the present study extends existing knowledge by highlighting the subjective meanings adolescents attribute to perfectionism and illustrating how perfectionistic beliefs are experienced in their daily lives.

The results emphasize the importance of considering adolescents' lived experiences when developing preventive, educational, and therapeutic interventions. A deeper understanding of these experiences may assist psychologists, counselors, educators, and mental health practitioners in designing interventions that address the emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal challenges associated with perfectionism. Future qualitative and mixed-methods studies are recommended to further examine the developmental and contextual factors shaping perfectionistic experiences across different adolescent populations.

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