

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ANXIETY AND PERFECTIONISM AMONG HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS IN ENUGU STATE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (ESUT)

BENEDICT CHIDI UGWUANYI

Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Nigeria
ototo4u@yahoo.com

ZBIGNIEW FORMELLA

Università Pontificia Salesiana, Roma, Italia
formella@unisal.it

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KINGSLEY UGOCHUKWU AMOKE

Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Nigeria
dicksonugochukwu69@gmail.com

Abstract:

One hundred and eighty (180) students participated in this study. The participants comprised of 135 male and 45 female undergraduate students. These students were between the ages of 19-23 years, with a mean age of 20.59 and a standard deviation of 0.43. They were selected by making use of convenience sampling technique from the population of student of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Enugu. Two instruments were used to gather information in this study. Abbreviated Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale and Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale. Demographic variables such as gender, age and class were explored. The participants were drawn from different faculties and department in the university. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to ascertain the relationship between perfectionism and anxiety. Anxiety was positively significantly related to level of study, and negatively related to perfectionism among students of Enugu state university of science and technology. Recommendations for future research and practical applications were provided.

Keywords: Anxiety, perfectionism, high-achieving students

INTRODUCTION

There seems to be an academic hunger for many Nigerian youths. When one engages in discussion with them, it is pretty easy to understand that they have a serious yearn for university education. To this effect, "some universities in recent time have come up with strategic plans in various ways to attract prospective students across borders through vigorous marketing initiatives and public relations strategies in promoting their institutions and the uniqueness of the various programmes offered by the institution" (Akintola et al., 2021, 147). The university will always want to admit the best students for each programme. This emphasis on academic excellence has resulted to some students feeling the pressure to

be perfect in their academic activities. In fact, several studies like Abdollahi and his colleagues (2018) suggest a link between perfectionism and anxiety in high-performing students.

At this point, we need to ask an important question. What is perfectionism? "Perfectionism is a personality style characterized by setting extremely high standards of performance, striving for flawlessness, and a tendency to be overly critical in evaluating one's performance" (Flett & Hewitt, 2005 as cited in Weinberg & Gould, 2019, 34). There are different patterns of perfectionism. *Self-oriented perfectionism* is setting high personal standards, self-criticism, and striving for perfection in one's own performance and achievements. *Socially prescribed perfectionism* is perceiving or experiencing pressure from external sources, such as parents, peers, or society, to meet high standards and expectations. *Other-oriented perfectionism* is imposing high standards, expectations, or criticism on others, seeking perfection in external standards or relations (Joshi, 2025).

The above points emphasize that perfectionists set extremely high and unrealistic standards for themselves. However, we need to ask another question, what causes perfectionism? There are different factors such as anxiety, fear of failure, low self-esteem, feeling of inadequacy, trauma, extreme procrastination, parental influence. Critical or perfectionist parents always find they dislike about the child even when the child makes every effort to please the parent. Again, growing up in a family where one or both parents were highly critical or their own perfectionism created expectations of their children that were beyond their ability to achieve could make the child to become a perfectionist (Miller, 2003).

In addition, anxiety is a big factor that cause perfectionism. However, it is not so easy to come up with a specific definition of anxiety because we at times confuse the term with fear. Anxiety is a natural and often necessary emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical changes like increased blood pressure. It is an innate response to stress or perceived threats, serving an evolutionary purpose by preparing the body to face danger commonly referred to as fight-to-fight response (Quill, 2024). "We all experience anxiety on some level. It only becomes a problem when people experience excessive level of anxiety. On a mild level it can cause some unsettling feelings. Whilst at more severe levels it can greatly affect daily life leading to excessive fears, worry and nervousness" (Swain, 2021, 20).

"One of the main causes of anxiety among students in higher education is academic stress. This pressure comes from a variety of sources, including high expectations from themselves, their parents, and their educators. Students often feel compelled to achieve high grades, which can lead to intense stress and anxiety. The competitive nature of the academic environment further exacerbates the problem, as students are constantly comparing their performance with that of their peers" (Jia, 2024, 112). The quest to be the best academically in the university makes the students to strive to be perfect. Thus, increasing their level of anxiety and stress. "When anxiety levels are higher than the established parameters and the response is inappropriate, anxiety ceases to be functional. In other words, the person invests time and effort into the manifestation of the symptoms, taking away dedication to other activities of daily life, which in turn creates more anxiety" (Hernández et al., 2020, 9). When students are

in constant competition for distinctive status, there is also potential for the students to have anxiety and strive for perfection.

Purpose of Study

The study aims to find out the relationship between perfectionism and anxiety in high achieving students in Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT). "The relationship between perfectionism and anxiety/ academic stress is particularly concerning, as high-achieving university students often strive for perfection in their academic pursuits. Furthermore, the impact of perfectionism and academic stress on the psychological well-being of college students is an important area of investigation" (Khanam & Gautam, 2024, 308).

"The perfectionist personality style is a result of a process of setting excessively high standards because of their quests and expectations of significant others and based on own previous performances. The aspiration to perfection is a human ideal intimately bound with the self-actualization need, but when it turns into a personality trait, beside positive issues, are also coming some negative cognitive and affective products, a decrease in well-being and in adaptability" (Curelaru et al., 2017, 1171). Furthermore, the study intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between perfectionism and anxiety in students. By addressing these variables, the research aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform interventions and support mechanisms to mitigate the negative effects of perfectionism and anxiety and promote the psychological well-being of the above-mentioned undergraduate students.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have shown interests in our variables of study but we will like to limit ourselves to two theories namely Hamachek's theory of perfectionism and cognitive model of anxiety.

Hamachek (1978) suggested that "the definition of perfectionism should distinguish between normal and neurotic perfectionism. Normal perfectionism involves the functional pursuit of excellence, whereas neurotic perfectionism includes self-denigration as a result of standards that are impossible to meet. In this view, in this view neurotic perfectionists are overly concerned about making mistakes and doubts their abilities" (Hamachek, 1978 as cited in Amster & Klein, 2018, 70). It is important to note that this theory tries to explain that perfectionism is a personality trait that strives for high standards of performance and is accompanied by a tendency to critically evaluate oneself, which is closely related to individual mental health and has a profound impact on individuals' work, study and life (Fang & Liu, 2022). (Hamachek, 1978 as cited in Schuler, 1999, 6) stated that "normal perfectionism develops from either positive or negative modelling. In positive modelling, an emotionally important person actively teaches and models a lifestyle that emphasizes a preference for what is correct, better than average, and doing one's personal best. Negative modelling occurs when someone desires to do the opposite of someone in his/her life who is constantly disorganized and does not follow through. Being meticulous, precise, neater, and more organized is in response to the negative model".

Coming to cognitive model of anxiety, the statement, “the way you think affects the way you feel,” summarizes this theory. “This simple statement is the cornerstone of cognitive theory and therapy of emotional disorders, and yet individuals often fail to recognize how their thoughts affect their mood state. Individuals usually assume that situations and not cognitions (i.e., appraisal) are responsible for their anxiety. Take for example, how you feel in the period before an exam. Anxiety will be high if you expect the exam to be difficult and you doubt your level of preparation. On the other hand, if you expect the exam to be quite easy or you are confident in your preparation, anxiety will be low” (Clark & Beck, 2010, 31). Again, “within this model, it is assumed that it is not events per se, but rather people’s expectations and interpretations of events, which are responsible for the production of negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, guilt, or sadness. In anxiety, the important interpretations, or cognitions, concern perceived physical or psychosocial danger. In everyday life, many situations are objectively dangerous. In such situations, individuals’ perceptions are often realistic appraisals of the inherent danger” (Clark, 1996 as cited in Salkovskis, 1997).

Hypothesis

1. Perfectionism will significantly correlate with anxiety in high achieving students in Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT).

Participants

One hundred and eighty (180) students participated in this study. The participants comprised of 135 male and 45 female undergraduate students. These students were between the ages of 19-23 years, with a mean age of 20.59 and a standard deviation of 0.43. They were selected by making use of convenience sampling technique from the population of student of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Enugu State. Demographic variables such as gender, age and class were explored.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to gather information in this study. Abbreviated Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale and Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale.

Procedure

A total of two hundred and fifty (250) copies of each instrument were distributed simultaneously to the participants in their classes. It was a simple structured questionnaire that did not take much time to fill. The students who participated in the study were drawn from Faculty of Applied Natural Science (Bio-chemistry, Geology and Mining, Applied Micro Biology); Environmental Sciences (Architecture, Urban and Regional planning); Education Faculty (Guidance and Counselling, Physical Health Education) and Faculty of Agricultural (Food and Science Technology and Agronomy). The participants were selected using convenience sampling technique as only those who were available and willing were used for the study. The aim and the nature of the study were explained to the participants, while being assured of confidentiality of their responses. The administration of the questionnaires was done in the various classes during the lecture free periods. A total number of 250 questionnaires were distributed, 220 were returned while 180 were properly filled after a recheck and were used for data analysis.

Design and statistics

Based on two variables (perfectionism and anxiety), hierarchical multiple regression was adopted showing predictive relationship between perfectionism and anxiety.

Results

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables

S/N	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1	Gender	1.75	.43	-			
2	Age	20.59	2.62	-.12*	-		
3	Level	2.31	1.09	.12*	.30***	-	
4	Perfectionism	21.42	4.95	-.15*	-.16**	-.01	-
5	Anxiety	12.56	3.05	.04	.07	.19**	-.14*

Note: *** $P < .001$; ** $P < .01$; * $P < .05$

Mean and standard deviation were computed for the data collected from the participants. Result of correlation indicated that anxiety was positively significantly related to level of study ($r = .19, p < .01$), and negatively related to perfectionism ($r = -.14, p < .05$) among students of Enugu state university of science and technology. Hence, an increase in perfectionism decreases anxiety. Gender was negatively significantly related to age ($r = -.12, p < .05$), perfectionism ($r = -.12, p > .05$) and positively related to level of study ($r = .12, p < .05$). Age was positively significantly related to level of study ($r = .30, p < .001$) and negatively related to perfectionism ($r = -.16, p < .01$).

Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression showing predictive relationship between perfectionism and anxiety.

	R	R ²	R ² Δ	B	Beta(β)	T
Step 1	.19	.04	.04			
Gender				.16	.02	.30
Age				.02	-.02	.24
Level of Study				.51*	.18*	2.32*
Step 2						
Perfectionism	.24	.06	.02	-.09	-.14	-1.88

Note: *** $P < .001$; ** $P < .01$; * $P < .05$

Result of Hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that among the demographic variables only level of education ($\beta = .18, p < .05$) is significantly related to anxiety; while gender ($\beta = .02, p > .05$) and age ($\beta = -.02, p > .05$) were not significantly related to anxiety among student of Enugu state university of science and Technology. The demographic variables accounted for 4% non-significant relationship change with anxiety ($R^2 = .04, p > .05$). Perfectionism did not significantly relate with anxiety ($\beta = -.14, p > .05$) among students of Enugu state university

of science and Technology. It accounted for 2% non-significant relationship change with anxiety ($R^2 = .02, p > .05$).

Summary of Findings

- 1). Anxiety was positively significantly related to level of study, and negatively related to perfectionism among students of Enugu state university of science and technology.
- 2). Level of study have significant predictive relationship with anxiety but gender and age did not.
- 3). Perfectionism did not have significant predictive relationship with anxiety among students of Enugu state university of science and Technology.

Implication of the study

The study's findings, indicating significant relationships between anxiety, the level of study, and perfectionism among high-achieving students, underscore the importance of addressing these psychological aspects in educational settings. It is essential to consider individual characteristics such as perfectionism and their impact on students' mental health. The negative correlation between perfectionism and anxiety highlights the need for supportive environments that help students develop healthy perfectionism, where they strive for excellence without succumbing to anxiety. It is essential to tackle the cause of perfectionism which is fear; the fear of not being good enough, the fear of others laughing at our work, the fear of disappointing other people, or the fear of not showing our best at work (Nagy, 2019).

Educational institutions should implement programs aimed at promoting mental health awareness and providing coping strategies for managing anxiety. These programs should be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by high-achieving students, including the pressures associated with academic excellence. Furthermore, counseling services should focus on helping students balance their perfectionistic tendencies with self-compassion and realistic goal-setting.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to students from Enugu State University of Science and Technology, which may not fully represent the diversity of high-achieving students in other regions or institutions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should aim to expand the scope of this study by including a more diverse sample of students from various universities and regions. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in understanding how the relationships between anxiety, perfectionism, and academic progression evolve over time. Additionally, exploring other potential moderating and mediating variables, such as social support, resilience, and cultural factors, could provide deeper insights into the complex interplay between these psychological constructs.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, this study found that anxiety is significantly related to the level of study and negatively related to perfectionism among high-achieving students at Enugu State University

of Science and Technology. However, perfectionism did not predict anxiety in the regression analysis. These results highlight the multifaceted nature of anxiety and perfectionism, suggesting that while they are related, other factors also play a critical role in influencing students' mental health. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that considers the various dimensions of students' academic and personal lives to develop effective interventions and support systems.

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