**A Holistic Approach to Academic Perfectionism with The SPACE Model of Coaching**

**Dr. Valentina Canessa-Pollard**

**Institute of Psychology, Business and Human Sicences, University of Chichester**

**Abstract**

**Background:** Academic perfectionism is characterised by a relentless pursuit of exceedingly high standards and harsh self-criticism, often resulting in both academic achievement and psychological distress. While traditionally seen as a personality trait, the influence of social context and the potential role of coaching in mitigating its negative effects are less understood. **Aims:** This study investigates the application of the SPACE coaching model as a holistic framework for addressing academic perfectionism. The model integrates physiological, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social dimensions, offering theoretical insights and practical strategies for coaches working with perfectionistic students. **Methods:** Four postgraduate students (3 women, 1 non-binary) participated in weekly coaching sessions with a coaching psychologist over the course of a month. Sessions followed the SPACE framework and were audio-recorded. Session transcripts, SPACE diagrams, and coaching reflections were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). **Results:** The findings indicated several behaviours (e.g., procrastination, gold-plating and hyper-focusing) contributing to frustration, anxiety, occasionally balanced by pride and enjoyment, alongside personal sacrifices and physical discomforts. The perfectionistic cycle was driven by self-beliefs of inadequacy, and reinforced by cognitive rumination over negative feedback, increasing self-criticism and compensatory behaviours, such as an obsessive focus on detail. Social factors like parental expectations, work experiences, and specific features of the academic environment further exacerbated these tendencies. **Discussion:** The study underscores the dynamic nature of academic perfectionism, shaped by individual and contextual factors. Coaches should employ strategies at the individual level, while advocating for changes in the social environment to reduce perfectionistic pressures. **Conclusion:** A holistic approach that addresses both the individual and broader social context is essential for supporting students in managing academic perfectionism, helping them achieve success while maintaining mental well-being.

**Key words:** academic perfectionism, SPACE model, coaching psychology, social influences, perfectionistic climate

**Introduction**

Academic perfectionism is broadly defined as an excessive concern with achieving flawless academic performance and maintaining exceptionally high standards, accompanied by overly critical self-evaluations (Frost et al., 1990b). While perfectionism can contribute to positive outcomes such as academic achievement (Fernández-García et al., 2022), subjective happiness and sense of accomplishment (Suh et al., 2017), it also poses substantial risks to mental health. Studies with undergraduate students have linked perfectionism with heightened levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and eating disorders in females (Bieling et al., 2003; Frost et al., 1997; Stoeber et al., 2017), as well as physiological problems related to stress reactivity, such as high blood pressure (Albert et al., 2016). Recent studies further highlight its association with suicidal ideation and the worsening of depressive symptoms over time among university students (Smith et al., 2018). Moreover, academic perfectionism appears to be on the rise. A recent meta-analytic study of over 41,000 university students in the United Kingdom and the United States found a significant increase in perfectionism levels from the 1980s to 2016 (Curran & Hill, 2022). Combined with its previously stated impact on well-being, this upward trend highlights the urgent need for effective interventions to help students manage perfectionistic tendencies in a manner that supports both academic success and mental health.

Traditionally studied within the framework of personality psychology, perfectionism is understood to be a multidimensional personality trait encompassing various interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions, significantly impacting psychological adjustment (e.g., Enns et al., 2005;Rice & Lapsley, 2001; Rice et al., 2006). Hewitt and colleagues (1991) conceptualised perfectionism into three types: self-oriented perfectionism (the self-directed belief that one must achieve flawless performance while vigilantly avoiding mistakes), socially-prescribed perfectionism (the belief that others expect flawless performance, driven by an extrinsically motivated locus of negative evaluation), and other-oriented perfectionism (the belief that others should deliver perfect performance, often manifesting through interpersonal blame and punitive behaviour). Frost further elaborated on perfectionism by identifying components that are differentially related to adaptive outcomes (Personal Standards; Organisation) and maladaptive outcomes (Concern over Mistakes; Doubting of Actions). Decades later, researchers continue to debate whether perfectionism is essentially maladaptive or can be both adaptive and maladaptive (Bieling et al., 2004). The complexity of this debate is heightened by the interplay between perfectionism and socio-cultural influences. For instance**,** Hill and Grugan (2020) introduced the concept of a perfectionistic climate—a social environment characterised by high expectations, criticism, control, conditional regard, and anxiety—that may sustain and bolster perfectionistic tendencies. This underscores the necessity for a comprehensive approach that integrates individual traits with contextual factors contributing to perfectionism.

The SPACE model, developed by Edgerton (see Edgerton & Palmer, 2005), provides a cognitive behavioural framework that examines an individual's challenges across five interconnected domains: Situation, Physiology, Action, Cognitions, and Emotions. By addressing these areas without prioritising any single aspect, the SPACE model facilitates a comprehensive understanding of an individual's problems or goals. This holistic approach allows for the identification of relationships between different components, aiding in the generation of effective solutions to unhelpful responses and barriers in one or more domains. This study aims to utilise SPACE as a qualitative tool to comprehensively explore academic perfectionism, identifying its drivers within the social and personal realms affecting students, and proposing strategies to mitigate its detrimental effects. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of perfectionism's features and the perceived consequences described by those who recognise these traits within themselves.

Our research questions were:

- How does the SPACE model support students with academic perfectionism?

- How can SPACE expand our understanding of academic perfectionism?

**Methods**

**Participants**

The study sample consists of university postgraduate students (N = 4) attending a small University in the UK. The mean age of the participants was 39.7 (range = 24-58) years. The sample consists of 3 women and 1 non-binary person. Information on the study was distributed through various university and faculty mailing lists. The inclusion criteria stated that participants identified themselves as academic perfectionists and were on postgraduate courses. Ethical approval was granted by the University, and written consent was obtained from all participants.

**Procedure**

Each participant attended consecutive weekly sessions, typically lasting 50 minutes each, with a coaching psychologist, who is also the author of this paper. Most students attended three sessions, with one student participating in five sessions. The sessions were conducted primarily via Microsoft Teams, with two sessions held in person.

**Use of the SPACE Model of Coaching**

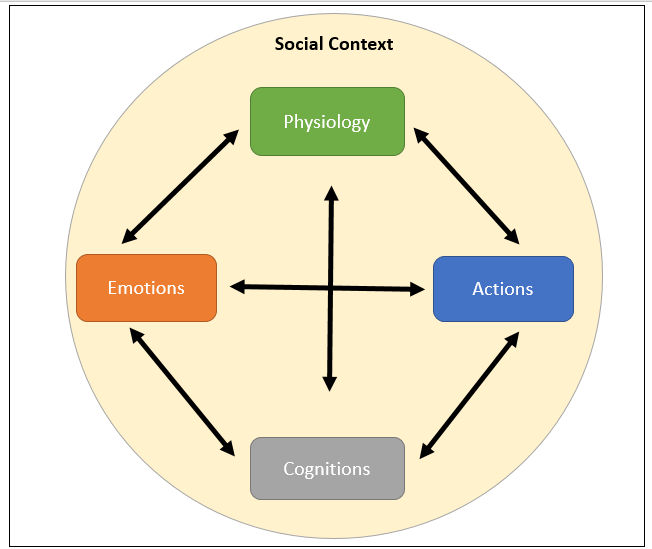
All participants were new to the SPACE model, which was introduced to them during the first session. Using a graphical tool called the SPACE diagram (Fig. 1), the model offers a structured, yet collaborative approach encompassing three distinct phases: blue work, red work, and green work.

Blue Work: During this initial phase, the focus is on identifying and articulating how perfectionistic tendencies manifest across different dimensions for the coachee. To populate the SPACE diagram, the client was prompted to recall a recent instance where they experienced perfectionism and consider how this situation impacted their SPACE system. Together, the coaching psychologist and coachee reviewed the diagram, noting which areas were less populated and required further exploration.

Red Work: After the initial mapping of the blue work, the coaching psychologist encouraged the coachee to explore the connections between the elements on the diagram and reflect on which ones caused them the most difficulty. The goal was to explore and challenge these elements, particularly identifying the underlying "hot thought" driving their perfectionistic behaviours and emotions. This phase aimed to challenge unhelpful thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours associated with academic perfectionism.

Green Work: The final phase of the coaching process, focuses on identifying and implementing helpful strategies across the five dimensions of the SPACE model.

By integrating these phases, the coaching sessions aimed to provide a holistic and personalised experience, and facilitate progress in managing academic perfectionism. Throughout the coaching process, a client-led approach was employed, allowing each session to focus on the needs and challenges of each student. At the end of each session, the collaboratively populated SPACE diagram was also shared with the coachee.

****

**Fig 1.** The SPACE model diagram illustrates the four dimensions (Physiology, Actions, Cognitions, Emotions) and their interactions (indicated by two-way arrows). Additionally, the Social context is represented as a fifth dimension, encircling the other four dimensions.

**Data Analysis**

The research was designed as a case series, with the dataset comprising transcripts, SPACE diagrams, and coaching reflections. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. A key principle of this study was to faithfully reflect the coachees' accounts while acknowledging the reflexive influence of the first author’s dual role as both practitioner and researcher. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was chosen for its alignment with the study's theoretical and paradigmatic assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and its use in similar research where the researcher also acts as the coaching psychologist (e.g., Hensel et al., 2023). The first author's interpretative framework was shaped by her background as a coaching psychologist as well as academic, which influenced her understanding of the coaching sessions. To maintain reflexivity, the researcher continuously cross-checked the transcripts and SPACE diagrams for each coachee against her initial interpretations, incorporating her immediate written reflections after the sessions into the analysis. The dataset was manually coded by the author using inductive descriptive codes to identify recurring phrases and themes in the participants' narratives. As data saturation is not deemed an appropriate concept to ascertain final sample size within reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the final sample was contingent on the perceived quality of collected data. Themes and sub-themes were re-organised in line with the SPACE framework and reflecting the flow of the coaching sessions.

**Findings**

**Behavioural Manifestations of Academic Perfectionism**

During the Blue Work phase, students highlighted various perfectionistic behaviours prevalent in their academic approach. Kate described the tendency to repeatedly restart assignments, explaining, “I repeat the process quite a lot. So I go back and start over multiple times.” Ellie echoed this sentiment, elaborating on her meticulous editing process, “You know your third rewrite should be your final and I was thinking something like ‘Oh no, mine usually goes to five’… there'd always be something that I could find that could be best, always something to improve.” Procrastination emerged as another significant behaviour, with Kate noting a tendency to “getting stuck up in things that should not take priority.” Additionally, all students admitted to gold-plating their work, investing excessive time in refining details that had minimal impact on their final grades. Amelia reflected on this, saying, “I guess trying to get everything to look aesthetically pleasing, spending silly amounts of time on colour and images.” This tendency to hyper-focus often resulted in personal sacrifices, as students prioritised their studies over family, friends and leisure time. Amber voiced her concerns, “I know it's a good role model to be at uni at this age for my kids, but on the other hand, it's very time-consuming and I don't spend enough time with them sometimes.” However, two students justified their choices as a form of personal investment, with Ellie explaining, “I suppose one perspective could be that maybe I have a little bit of a selfish or self-centred outlook...but this [my own learning] is what I think is most important.”

**Mixed Emotions Related to Academic Perfectionism**

Coachees revealed a spectrum of emotions tied to their academic perfectionism. Amelia, for instance, shared her heightened anxiety due to dyslexia, explaining, "With dyslexia, I can really miss the brief sometimes and misunderstand what the assignment requires of me. So I feel like I need to, uh, counterbalance those failures or those times that I don't do so well by doing my absolute best when I can….Will I have the time to spell check?" Kate expressed frustration with her perfectionistic behaviours, acknowledging, "This [starting over again] is really frustrating and then I kind of argue with myself and say, yeah, but if you do it again, you'll understand it more, you'll do better." She also reflected on the pressure she felt to meet high standards, stating, "Especially if it's work that's for like doing for someone else or something that I've promised to someone. I always do end up doing it. I always do. But it just takes all the time I have."

Yet, all coachees highlighted positive emotions linked to their academic perfectionism, expressing pride in their work and in their desire for knowledge. For example, Ellie noted, "Not many people have that skill of finding small mistakes, and I've been making things better, like seeing where things could be improved." Amber stated "If something piques my interest, I want to know all about it." Moreover, they found enjoyment in certain aspects of their academic endeavours. Kate described her enjoyment of revising past papers and creating mind maps, saying, "I have access to past papers, they have patterns, and I have fun with that as I create mind maps." Amelia expressed how fulfilling it was to refine her work aesthetically, stating, "I really enjoy working on something and making it pretty, it’s almost addictive."

**Physical Consequences of Academic Perfectionism**

Several physical symptoms linked to academic perfectionism were identified, particularly in terms of short-term discomforts. These included tense shoulders, neck and back pain from extended computer use, headaches, teeth grinding, tight chest, and sensory overwhelm. Amelia highlighted the sensory overload aspect, stating, “Things annoy me more than they would normally do in terms of sound and textures and things like that.” Two coachees also mentioned longer-term health issues such as disordered eating patterns, weight gain due to prolonged periods without breaks, and gastrointestinal problems. However, the other two coachees were not fully aware of these physical manifestations. As Ellie succinctly expressed, “I don’t really notice, I had it for so long [backache]. You just live to put up with that.”

**The Social Context Colluding with Academic Perfectionism**

When discussing the social factors influencing their perfectionistic tendencies, coachees initially highlighted parental influences. For instance, one coachee recounted an incident that illustrated high parental expectations: “One day I came back from school and I got 93% on a test and my father asked, ‘What did you lose the rest on?’”. Another said that while her parents and teachers did not explicitly pressure her, they showed pride in her achievements, which led her to internalise the pressure to excel: “They were supportive, never ‘You have to do this,’ but ‘You have the potential to do this, we will help you.’ So I put the pressure on myself to ‘keep it up’ ”. For three coachees, academic perfectionism was also linked to previous work experiences. One coachee described how her past job, where her work was frequently second-guessed and underappreciated, contributed to self-doubt in her academic efforts. Another, a returning mature student, cited the lack of recent academic experience as a source of anxiety: "I feel rusty, and then the second thing is that I've been working as a research assistant for the last few years, so I've got those kinds of standards in my head". One coachee mentioned her high expectations from a previous role: "No matter what, I always got the work done. When I left, my boss had to replace me with three new roles," reflecting the exceptionally high level of expectations placed on her by her employer.

Participants also identified specific aspects of their current academic environment that triggered or reinforced their perfectionistic tendencies. Vague briefs and multiple assessment criteria were all cited as exacerbating perfectionistic behaviours, leaving students uncertain about defining high standards. As Kate explained, “With no specific word count you can go in-depth as you like, if they say ‘cover what you want as long as you have done X, Y, Z’, so I don’t know when to stop.” Amelia also said: “The assessment criteria, I personally feel like I need to make sure I tick every one of those boxes to the highest level. And especially in a master’s programme, you feel like you have one chance; each assessment makes up your end score”. Negative feedback also triggered performance dissatisfaction, as Kate stated: “if I see positive feedback I think ‘they are being nice’, but I will read and re-read the negative feedback and feel frustrated at myself ‘why did I do that?’”. Additionally, she mentioned how peer group expectations due to previous high academic achievement added pressure: “There’s an expectation that I know the answers, and what the assignments are and how to tackle them.”

**Cognitions Driving and Maintaining Academic Perfectionism**

In their initial exploration of their SPACE system, several coachees' cognitions were present. One prominent thought was related to maximising opportunities, where participants expressed a sense of urgency and pressure to excel academically. This was linked to perfectionistic thoughts about future-proofing, such as, “I need my CV to look as strong as possible in order to get the job that I want” and “I want to protect my future self” (Amelia) and “It’s like ‘this is actually your degree, so it’s really important’ ” (Kate). Additionally, there was a commitment to seeing tasks through to the end, as illustrated by Amber’s statement, “I wish I didn’t pick this, but I have invested half my week so I just need to carry on.”

Internalised expectations and responsibility also emerged as significant themes. Thoughts like, “I must be responsible” and “I must be an adult” (Ellie) reflected internalised pressures. Kate echoed this sentiment, saying, “I don’t want to hand in a shoddy piece of work because that’s out of character.”

During the red work phase, key cognitions, sometimes referred to as the ‘Hot Thought’, was collaboratively explored. This thought is so closely tied to the emotions of the coachees that they cannot think it without experiencing the associated emotions. For all but one coachee, the hot thought was identified as, “I am not good enough.” This belief was closely linked to behaviours like procrastination and gold-plating. One coachee explained, “If I don’t do it, then I can’t do it wrong,” highlighting how the fear of making mistakes led to procrastination.

Fear of failure was also strongly linked to the hot thought of “not being good enough”. For example, Amelia mentioned “ I actually think I won’t be doing well at future assignments. So I need to do this one right.” Two coachees described that over-focusing on negative feedback and re-reading it multiple times reinforced their belief that they weren’t good enough, as Kate stated: “I just tell myself ‘You are not cut out for this’ ” and ‘this isn’t my space’ ”. One coachee explained that this self-talk was often accompanied by hearing their mother's critical voice in their mind.

Therefore, the belief of "not being good enough" heavily influenced the internal dialogue, emotions, and perfectionistic behaviours of the coachees. This belief played a significant role not only during the process of creating coursework but also in their self-critical reactions to perceived failures in meeting their exacting standards. This dynamic created a cycle of high pressure and self-doubt among the coachees.

**Helpful Strategies**

Based on the initial exploration of the SPACE system, coachees identified various effective behavioural strategies and shared their experiences experimenting with these strategies over the course of the month. For instance, strategies such as incorporating exercise in moments when they could not work on the assignments were more durable as perceived not to impinge on their work. Ellie mentioned, "I replace those in-between times where I’d drive with walking when possible," while Amber found that "stretching before going to sleep helps as at that point the assignment is not on my mind." Ellie also mentioned the benefit of using a special adjustable desk and exercise chair to alternate between sitting and standing while working.

Setting boundaries around breaks during coursework proved challenging for some, with one coachee admitting, "I ignore reminders," but they found accountability helpful, stating, "If I am held accountable by someone else I can do great things." Biofeedback techniques were also beneficial, with one coachee using a watch for breathing reminders and standing goals, which provided a sense of accomplishment “ (Kate)

Prioritising tasks and breaking them down into smaller steps proved effective at reducing overwhelm, counteracting procrastination. Techniques such as the Pomodoro method and writing out criteria were mentioned as helpful strategies. Amber highlighted the importance of also changing their work environment to reduce distractions and the possibility of “absorbing others’ stresses”, moving from a crowded office space to a quieter, more peaceful area with better ventilation and a view of the garden.

From a cognitive perspective, gaining a wider perspective proved insightful for all coachees. Some had recently experienced life-changing events such as bereavement, trauma, or health concerns, experiences that shifted their priorities and highlighted what truly mattered to them. Parenthood also provided a broader perspective for one coachee, who mentioned that being a parent helped her "pick my battles" and relax some of her standards.

This broader perspective also enabled coachees to cultivate self-compassion and adopt positive self-talk strategies. Amelia visualised a metaphorical house, with some beige bricks representing working at an acceptable standard, and some colourful bricks representing her best work, to remind her that "not all bricks need to be colourful, the house is still standing". Two coachees quietened their self-criticism via self-affirmations such as "I am going to smash this" (Kate), or by exploring in the session techniques involving imaginary allies.

Overall, coachees found coaching helpful in gaining greater self-awareness—one noted, "it was helpful to explore how much my perfectionism can have a less-than-ideal impact on myself"—and a broader understanding of perfectionism, as another reflected, "I took time to reflect on all of the different parts of the picture, including the social context, rather than just one area." However, one coachee mentioned that some sessions left them feeling, "hyper-aware of my weaknesses, and so a bit demotivated. It might have been good to explore strategies during the last 5 minutes of these earlier sessions so that I left with more optimism for the future." Another coachee remarked, "We focused on solutions related to a select number of hot thoughts/feelings, but I am left wondering what to do with the things we didn't talk about" indicating the potential discovery of interconnected issues that may require re-contracting.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to explore academic perfectionism using the SPACE model of coaching, with the goal of enhancing theoretical understanding and providing practical support for students. In this discussion, we will first address three main theoretical contributions of this study, and then consider the implications for coaching practice.

**Shifting the Focus from Consequences to Mechanisms**

Much of the debate surrounding perfectionism has centred on its outcomes, whether positive, negative, or a combination of both (Suh et al., 2017; Bieling et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2018). While also reporting many of the consequences documented in previous literature (e.g., anxiety, overwhelm, frustration, sense of accomplishment), this study aims to pivot towards exploring the mechanisms that initiate and perpetuate perfectionism. In line with previous research (Conroy et al., 2007; Sagar & Stoeber, 2009), common perfectionistic concerns identified in this study included fear of making mistakes, doubts about one's actions, fear of failure, and internalising expectations. Using the SPACE model, it became evident that these concerns often stemmed from the core belief of "not being good enough." Gilbert and colleagues (2004) described this form of self-criticism as Inadequacy Self-Criticism, where individuals attempt to address their perceived inadequacies by altering their behaviour. Beliefs of inadequacy often lead participants to engage in compensatory behaviours such as excessive repetition and meticulous attention to detail. These actions perpetuate a cycle of heightened pressure and self-doubt, causing individuals to sacrifice their well-being in an effort to alleviate anxieties relative to their perfectionistic standards. The cycle is further reinforced by a tendency to focus on negative feedback (i.e., cognitive rumination), which exacerbates performance dissatisfaction, as noted by Besser et al. (2004). This ongoing process demonstrates how self-criticism functions as a maintaining mechanism in perfectionism, continually driving the pursuit of unrealistic standards and reinforcing a persistent sense of inadequacy.

**Moving Beyond Binary Perspectives of Perfectionism**

Our findings, consistent with existing literature, indicate that academic perfectionism encompasses both perfectionistic strivings—the pursuit of exceptionally high personal standards—and perfectionistic concerns, which involve worry over mistakes, fear of negative evaluation by others, and feelings of discrepancy between one’s standards and actual performance. Perfectionistic concerns are often linked to beliefs of inferiority, lower self-esteem, and heightened negative emotions (Dunkley et al., 2012; Fernández-García et al., 2022; Rice & Slaney, 2002). In contrast, perfectionistic strivings (coupled with low concerns) —are associated with greater self-efficacy, well-being, and self-esteem (Mobley et al., 2005; Park & Jeong, 2015; Suh et al., 2017), though such findings may conflate pursuit of excellence with pursuit of perfection (Gaudreau, 2019; Molnar et al., 2007). While these dimensions are frequently labelled as adaptive/healthy and maladaptive/unhealthy perfectionism (Stoeber et al., 2020), our research advocates for a more nuanced understanding that recognises both dimensions as part of the same overarching construct, rather than treating them as distinct entities. For example, students striving for perfectionistic academic standards often experience pride in their hard work and achievements, yet also guilt from personal sacrifices and fears of inadequacy if insufficient time is dedicated to assignments. Studies have shown that both pride and guilt are more pronounced in adaptive and maladaptive perfectionists compared to non-perfectionists (Stoeber et al., 2006). Moreover, other studies report unhealthy outcomes for both types of perfectionism under adversarial life conditions (e.g., Bieling et al., 2004; Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Flett et al., 1995), which challenges simplistic distinctions between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism. Our findings also echo Flett and Hewitt's (2002) exploration of whether adaptive perfectionists may encounter similar levels of distress and maladjustment as maladaptive perfectionists when facing comparable stressors, underscoring the fluidity of perfectionism distinctions depending on the context.

**Contributions from Social Context**

In examining these contextual factors, our study underscores the significant role of environmental influences in shaping perfectionistic tendencies. Participants frequently reported that their interactions with significant others reflected the characteristics of a "Perfectionistic Climate" as defined by Hill and Grugan (2020). This concept involves the informational cues and goal structures that dictate expectations and evaluations. Participants described experiences with unrealistically high expectations from parents, teachers, and peers. Elements of the perfectionistic climate—such as high expectations, criticism, control, conditional regard, and anxiety over mistakes—were evident in the coachees’ accounts, highlighting how these factors contributed to the perpetuation of their perfectionistic concerns.

Our findings further illuminate how certain aspects of the academic context exacerbate or perpetuate perfectionistic behaviours, particularly features perceived as introducing uncertainty—such as creative assignments, ambiguous assessment criteria, lack of word limits, inability to consult tutors, and novel tasks. A growing body of evidence highlights Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU) as a full mediator between perfectionism and both life satisfaction and psychopathology (Reuther et al., 2013; Kawamato & Furtani, 2018), underscoring IU's significant role in the associations between perfectionism dimensions and psychological adjustment. IU is the tendency to perceive, interpret, and respond to uncertain situations as threatening (Dugas et al., 2004). Self-identified perfectionists often feel compelled to make perfect decisions to achieve perfect outcomes, which may make them intolerant of a lack of information (Buhr & Dugas, 2006; Reuther et al., 2013). IU is also associated with the tendency to overestimate the likelihood and consequences of errors (Clark & Beck, 2011), a key concern among perfectionists, who frequently perceive mistakes as threats (Frost & Marten, 1990a).

**Implications for Coaching Practice**

Addressing academic perfectionism through coaching requires a nuanced approach that recognises its complexity. As this study highlights, adopting a holistic perspective during coaching sessions is essential. Frameworks such as the SPACE model provide a structured method for exploring the dimensions of perfectionism in light of an individual's unique characteristics and social context. This approach helps clients identify how perfectionism may manifest in previously unconsidered ways.

Given the goal-oriented nature of coaching, clients may feel pressured to achieve flawless outcomes. Coaches can counteract this by emphasising effort, learning opportunities, and personal growth, thus avoiding the potential for coaching to become a perfectionistic climate (Hill & Grugan, 2020). Additionally, given the perceived positive aspects of perfectionism, coaches could balance their focus by addressing both the benefits and challenges of perfectionistic tendencies. This balanced perspective may allow coachees to harness the motivating aspects of perfectionism—such as high standards and a drive for excellence—while also acknowledging the potential pitfalls, such as anxiety and burnout. This complexity echoes Gaudreau's (2021) theoretical model, which distinguishes perfectionism from its "signature expressions." These include cognitive dimensions, such as doubts about actions, worries about mistakes, and perceived discrepancies. These signature expressions are reframed as correlates commonly experienced by perfectionists, rather than core definitional elements of dispositional perfectionism.

Furthermore, coaches can support clients in building resilience against uncertainty. Behavioural experiments can help challenge catastrophic beliefs about uncertainty by providing disconfirming evidence and fostering more balanced beliefs, reducing the perfectionistic drive for control and certainty (Hebert & Dugas, 2019). Mindfulness programs can also alleviate uncertainty-related stress by encouraging a non-judgmental, nonreactive, and self-compassionate stance (Pickard et al., 2024).

Although this study concentrated on the UK academic environment, the concept of perfectionism is pertinent across various cultures (e.g., Bong et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2019; Walton et al., 2020). The SPACE model has been translated into several languages, including Portuguese ("FACES," Dias et al., 2010) and Polish ("SFERA," Syrek-Kosowska et al., 2010). This makes it a useful tool in different cultural contexts, provided the model is adapted beyond simple translation to address semantic and conceptual differences, ethnocentrism, and cultural dynamism (see Anjum & Aziz, 2024 for a detailed discussion).

**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study's small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, and the potential for self-selection bias may impact the validity of the results. Despite these limitations, the study has highlighted the complex interplay between individual and social factors in sustaining perfectionism, including the influence of the academic environment. It provides a nuanced perspective that goes beyond the simplistic healthy versus unhealthy perfectionism divide and offers valuable insights into coaching practices for academic perfectionism.

Future research should focus on several key areas. Firstly, longitudinal studies are needed to explore the fluid nature of perfectionism, particularly how individuals with varying perfectionistic traits manage their emotions and behaviours over time and in different contexts. Second, the role of social context remains critical. Future studies could explore how factors introducing uncertainty interact with perfectionism, specifically exploring intolerance of uncertainty (IU) as a mediator between perfectionism and psychological outcomes. Experimental studies should test whether academic environments that mitigate perfectionistic tendencies—by setting high but achievable demands, offering clearer guidelines, encouraging mistakes through direct links between formative and summative assessments, and providing positively framed, specific, feedback—can positively impact perfectionism.

Lastly, studies could examine how tailored coaching strategies, based on the SPACE model, impact the cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects of perfectionism in students. Research could focus on identifying which coaching techniques are most effective in addressing perfectionistic concerns and enhancing adaptive strivings. Moreover, exploring the impact of coaching on improving students' resilience to academic and social pressures could provide valuable insights into developing more effective support systems. By evaluating these interventions, future research can contribute to refining coaching practices and expanding their applicability in mitigating the negative aspects of perfectionism.

**New Paper Statement**

We confirm that this manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration in any other publication.

**References**

Albert, P., Rice, K. G., & Caffee, L. (2016). Perfectionism affects blood pressure in response to repeated exposure to stress. *Stress and Health*, *32*(2), 157-166. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2591>

Anjum, G., & Aziz, M. (2024). Advancing equity in cross-cultural psychology: embracing diverse epistemologies and fostering collaborative practices. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, 1368663.

Besser, A., Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2004). Perfectionism, cognition, and affect in response to performance failure vs. success. *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, *22*, 297-324. <https://doi.org/10.1023/b:jore.0000047313.35872.5c>

Bieling, P. J., Israeli, A., & Antony, M. M. (2004). Is perfectionism good, bad, or both? Examining models of the perfectionism construct *Personality and individual differences* *36*(6), 1373-1385. <https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-8869(03)00235-6>

Bieling, P. J., Israeli, A., Smith, J., & Antony, M. M. (2003). Making the grade: the behavioural consequences of perfectionism in the classroom. *Personality and Individual Differences, 35*(1), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-8869(02)00173-3>

Bong, M., Hwang, A., Noh, A., & Kim, S. I. (2014). Perfectionism and motivation of adolescents in academic contexts. *Journal of educational psychology*, *106*(3), 711.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>

Buhr, K., & Dugas, M. J. (2006). Investigating the construct validity of intolerance of uncertainty and its unique relationship with worry. *Journal of anxiety disorders*, *20*(2), 222-236. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2004.12.004>

Clark, D.A,. & Beck,  A.T.  (2011). *Cognitive therapy of anxiety disorders: science and practice.* Guilford Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2012.06.004>

Conroy, D. E., Kaye, M. P., & Fifer, A. M. (2007). Cognitive links between fear of failure and perfectionism. *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, *25*, 237-253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10942-007-0052-7>

Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2022). Young people’s perceptions of their parents’ expectations and criticism are increasing over time: Implications for perfectionism. *Psychological Bulletin*, *148*(1-2), 107. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000347>

Dias,, G.P., Edgerton, N., & Palmer, S. (2010). From SPACE to FACES: The adaptation of the SPACE model of cognitive behavioural coaching and therapy to the Portuguese language. *Coaching Psychology International*, *3*(1), 12-15.

Dugas, M. J., Buhr, K., & Ladouceur, R. (2004). The Role of Intolerance of Uncertainty in Etiology and Maintenance. In R. G. Heimberg, C. L. Turk, & D. S. Mennin (Eds.), *Generalized anxiety disorder: Advances in research and practice*. The Guilford Press.

Dunkley, D. M., Berg, J. L., & Zuroff, D. C. (2012). The role of perfectionism in daily self‐esteem, attachment, and negative affect. *Journal of Personality*, *80*(3), 633-663. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2011.00741.x>

Edgerton, N., & Palmer, S. (2005). SPACE: A Psychological model for use within cognitive behavioural coaching, therapy and stress management. *The Coaching Psychologist, 2*(2), 25-31. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119835714.ch1>

Enns, M. W., & Cox, B. J. (2005). Perfectionism, stressful life events, and the 1-year outcome of depression. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, *29*, 541-553. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-005-2414-8>

Fernández-García, O., Gil-Llario, M. D., Castro-Calvo, J., Morell-Mengual, V., Ballester-Arnal, R., & Estruch-García, V. (2022). Academic perfectionism, psychological well-being, and suicidal ideation in college students. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *20*(1), 85. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20010085>

Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2002). Perfectionism and maladjustment: Theoretical, definitional, and treatment issues. In G. L. Flett & P. L. Hewitt (Eds.), *Perfectionism: Theory, research, and treatment.* American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10458-001>

Flett G. L., Hewitt P. L. (2014). “The perils of perfectionism in sports” revisited: Toward a broad understanding of the pressure to be perfect and its impact on athletes and dancers. International Journal of Sport Psychology, *45*, 395–407. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00326.x>

Flett G. L., Hewitt P. L., Blankstein K. R., Mosher S. W. (1995). Perfectionism, life events, and depressive symptoms: A test of a diathesis-stress model. Current Psychology, *14*, 112–137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02686885>

Frost, R. O., & Marten, P. A. (1990a). Perfectionism and evaluative threat. *Cognitive therapy and research*, *14*, 559-572. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01173364>

Frost, R. O., Marten, P., Lahart, C., & Rosenblate, R. (1990b). The dimensions of perfectionism. *Cognitive therapy and research*, *14*, 449-468. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01172967

Frost, R. O., Trepanier, K. L., Brown, E. J., Heimburg, R. G., Juster, H. R., Leung, A. W., & Makris, G. S. (1997). Self-Monitoring of Mistakes Among Subjects High and Low in Concern Over Mistakes. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, *21*, 209–222.

Gaudreau, P. (2019). On the distinction between personal standards perfectionism and excellencism: A theory elaboration and research agenda. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *14*(2), 197-215.

Gaudreau, P. (2021). Separating the core definitional feature and the signature expressions of dispositional perfectionism: Implications for theory, research, and practice. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *181*, 110975. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110975>

Gilbert, P., Clarke, M., Hempel, S., Miles, J. N., & Irons, C. (2004). Criticizing and reassuring oneself: An exploration of forms, styles and reasons in female students. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *43*(1), 31-50. <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466504772812959>

Hebert, E. A., & Dugas, M. J. (2019). Behavioral experiments for intolerance of uncertainty: Challenging the unknown in the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, *26*(2), 421-436. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.07.007>

Hensel, J., Palmer, S., & Wise, K. (2023). The Conservatoire Coach’s Casebook Notes: a thematic analysis. *International Journal of Coaching Psychology*, *4*(4), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.53841/bpstcp.2015.11.2.106>

Hewitt, P. L., Flett, G. L., Turnbull-Donovan, W., & Mikail, S. F. (1991). The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale: Reliability, validity, and psychometric properties in psychiatric samples. *Psychological Assessment: A Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *3*(3), 464. [https://doi.org/10.1037//1040-3590.3.3.464](https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.3.3.464)

Hill, A. P., & Grugan, M. (2020). Introducing perfectionistic climate. *Perspectives on early childhood psychology and education*, *4*(2), 263-276.

Kawamoto, T., & Furutani, K. (2018). The mediating role of intolerance of uncertainty on the relationships between perfectionism dimensions and psychological adjustment/maladjustment among mothers. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *122*, 62-67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.10.008>

Mobley, M., Slaney, R.B., & Rice, K.G. (2005). Cultural validity of the Almost Perfect Scale--Revised for African American college students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* *52*(4), 629. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.4.629>

Molnar D. S., Sirois F. M., Flett G. L., Janssen W. F., & Hewitt P. L. (2017). The roles of health behaviors and stress-related processes. In Stoeber J. (Ed.), The psychology of perfectionism: Theory, research, applications (pp. 200–221). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315536255-14>

Park, H. J., & Jeong, D. Y. (2015). Psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and self-esteem among adaptive perfectionists, maladaptive perfectionists, and nonperfectionists. *Personality and individual differences*, *72*, 165-170. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.08.031>

Pickard, J. A., Deane, F. P., & Gonsalvez, C. J. (2024). Effects of a brief mindfulness intervention program: Changes in mindfulness and self-compassion predict increased tolerance of uncertainty in trainee psychologists. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, *18*(1), 69. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000466>

Reuther, E. T., Davis III, T. E., Rudy, B. M., Jenkins, W. S., Whiting, S. E., & May, A. C. (2013). Intolerance of uncertainty as a mediator of the relationship between perfectionism and obsessive‐compulsive symptom severity. *Depression and Anxiety*, *30*(8), 773-777. <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22100>

Rice, K. G., & Lapsley, D. K. (2001). Perfectionism, coping, and emotional adjustment. *Journal of College Student Development*, *42*(2), 157-168.

Rice, K. G., Leever, B. A., Christopher, J., & Porter, J. D. (2006). Perfectionism, stress, and social (dis) connection: A short-term study of hopelessness, depression, and academic adjustment among honors students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *53*(4), 524. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.53.4.524>

Rice, K. G., Park, H. J., Hong, J., & Lee, D. G. (2019). Measurement and implications of perfectionism in South Korea and the United States. *The Counselling Psychologist*, 47(3), 384-416.

Rice, K. G., & Slaney, R. B. (2002). Clusters of perfectionists: Two studies of emotional adjustment and academic achievement. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, *35*(1), 35-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481756.2002.12069046>

Sagar, S. S., & Stoeber, J. (2009). Perfectionism, fear of failure, and affective responses to success and failure: The central role of fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment. *Journal of sport and exercise psychology*, *31*(5), 602-627. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.31.5.602>

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>

Stoeber, J., Madigan, D. J., Damian, L. E., Esposito, R. M., & Lombardo, C. (2017). Perfectionism and eating disorder symptoms in female university students: The central role of perfectionistic self-presentation. *Eating and Weight Disorders-Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*, *22*, 641-648. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-016-0297-1>

Stoeber, J., Madigan, D. J., & Gonidis, L. (2020). Perfectionism is adaptive and maladaptive, but what's the combined effect?. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *161*, 109846. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109846>

Stoeber, J., & Otto, K. (2006). Positive conceptions of perfectionism: Approaches, evidence, challenges. *Personality and social psychology review*, *10*(4), 295-319. <https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1004_2>

Syrek-Kosowska, A., Edgerton, N., & Palmer, S. (2010). From SPACE to SFERA: adaptation of the SPACE model of cognitive behavioural coaching and therapy to the Polish language. *Coaching Psychology International*, 3(2), 18-20.

Suh, H., Gnilka, P. B., & Rice, K. G. (2017). Perfectionism and well-being: A positive psychology framework. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *111*, 25-30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.01.041>

Walton, G. E., Hibbard, D. R., Coughlin, C., & Coyl-Shepherd, D. D. (2020). Parenting, personality, and culture as predictors of perfectionism. *Current Psychology*, 39, 681-693.