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The Impact of Parents on Perfectionism among Chinese Primary School Students

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Abstract. The world is observing a rise of perfectionism, a personality trait associated with many maladaptive psychological outcomes. However, how perfectionism is displayed among Chinese primary school students may be different from the claims made in Western literature. Thus, by adopting Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the present study aims to elucidate the perfectionism profile in Chinese primary school students by drawing on the cultural background and the role of parents. Through desk-based research, it is found that adaptive perfectionism is most prevalent among Chinese primary school students, students internalise parents' expectations, leading to the development of perfectionism, and parenting plays an influential role in shaping students' perfectionism. The examination of the cultural root, namely Confucianism, enables intervention to be developed accordingly, which should promote the ideas of continuous self-improvement and learning from mistakes. Future studies are advised to employ both cross-sectional and longitudinal research and use various methodologies to address relevant issues pertaining to perfectionism in China.

Keywords: primary school students, China, Confucianism, perfectionism

1. Introduction

Perfectionism, defined as "a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations," may have significant mental health implications, manifested as stress and anxiety [1]. Due to the rise of perfectionism globally, it is crucial to examine the threat that this personality trait poses to the student population [1,2].

This review centres on primary school students in China. The existing literature on this population suggests that there is a positive side to perfectionism in education that could be attributed to the Chinese culture [2]. However, as China is seemingly becoming meritocratic [3], whether perfectionism is adaptive or maladaptive becomes blurred in the changing cultural context. Moreover, due to the scarce literature outside of the Western sample [2], a review would benefit researchers by summarising the effort that has been devoted to the field.

Cultural influences are reflected in students' proximal environments [4], with parenting emerging as a particularly influential factor. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have demonstrated the prominent effect of parenting on adolescents' perfectionism in the Western context [1,5], justifying

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the importance of accounting for parenting when researchers attempt to understand students' perfectionism.

Thus, by adopting a desk-based research approach and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive review regarding how perfectionism is shaped among Chinese primary school students, directly through parenting and indirectly through culture, and to suggest future directions to address the mental health benefits and challenges associated with perfectionism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perfectionism

Factor analyses of different perfectionism scales suggest that perfectionism possesses both a positive/adaptive and a negative/maladaptive factor [6,7]. Adaptive perfectionists set high personal standards, which are adjusted based on past performance, leading to persistent academic effort [8]. Contrastingly, maladaptive perfectionists' standards are rigid, and they tend to be overly concerned with their mistakes, resulting in psychological maladaptation [8]. Studies have consistently found that maladaptive perfectionism could increase depressive proneness and procrastination tendencies, while adaptive perfectionists are less likely to worry about criticisms and have doubts over their actions [9-11]. By drawing on the aforementioned factors of perfectionism, this review will examine how each factor is developed among primary school students within the Chinese cultural and educational contexts.

2.2. Chinese educational and cultural context

Regarding the educational context, Fong and Cai [12] documented the intense academic pressure that exists within Chinese primary schools, especially in the final two years. This is because the final exams of the primary school stage could determine which middle school the students could attend; a better grade would enhance the likelihood of attending a better middle school, thus influencing the students' future outcome.

Regarding the cultural context, researchers have observed the coexistence of Confucianism and meritocracy. Confucianism emphasises personal effort in achieving high standards [13]. This coincides with the dominant meritocratic discourse, a driving force behind the global rise in perfectionism, which posits that effort and talent can help one achieve one's desire [1]. Moreover, due to Confucianism's emphasis on family responsibility for education, parental involvement is seen as integral to students' success [14]. This belief integrates with meritocracy, where parents also believe that hard work is crucial for one's success [14]. Since meritocracy is strongly related to perfectionism, this merger implies the potential salience of parents in shaping children's perfectionism in China. Notably, how Confucianism is related to perfectionism is understudied [8]. The lack of literature highlights the importance of understanding what has been found currently in the Eastern literature to suggest future directions.

2.3. Parents and the development of perfectionism

Parenting may be an influential factor for the onset of perfectionism. A review suggests that children would internalise their parents' expectations [15]. Furthermore, how parents control and respond to children's needs could also influence children's perfectionistic tendencies. For instance, by drawing on Baumrind's parenting styles (authoritarian, controlling, and unresponsive; permissive,

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uninvolved, and unresponsive; and authoritative, involved, and responsive), Flett et al. [15] found a significant link between parenting style and students' perfectionism type. In addition to Confucianism's accentuation on parental involvement, the findings highlight the importance of reviewing the impact of parents on Chinese primary school students' perfectionism.

2.4. Ecological systems theory

To approach the topic more systematically, this review adopts the Ecological Systems Theory. The theory posits that human development occurs through the mutual adaptation between the individual and the immediate environment, situated within the broader nested social context, which consists of four layers [4]. In this review, the organism would be the Chinese primary school student. The innermost layer is the microsystem, which is the immediate setting in which the student resides. This could be the family that one belongs to or the school that one attends. The next layer is the mesosystem, referring to the interrelations between the immediate settings. The third layer is the exosystem, which denotes the broader formal or informal social structure. The final layer is the macrosystem, which is the overarching institutional patterns. The patterns could be manifested as ideology, such as culture, or concretely through the micro-, meso-, and exosystems. The macrosystem defines the purpose of different structures and affords meanings to activities. In the context of the present study, this corresponds to Chinese culture.

3. Analysis results

3.1. Perfectionism in China

Quantitative research indicates that positive perfectionism is more prevalent among Chinese primary school students than negative perfectionism: students tended to score higher on positive perfectionism than negative perfectionism [16]. Moreover, by administering questionnaires to 882 students from grades two and six, Chan [17] found that adaptive perfectionists constitute the largest group (23%-70%), while the maladaptive perfectionist population constitutes 14%-41%. Those adaptive perfectionists possess traits that are beneficial to learning, which include accepting mistakes as a part of self-improvement, greater self-efficacy, being more self-compassionate, and greater life satisfaction and happiness [8,12,18].

3.2. Parents in China

Parents often hold high academic expectations for their children, which the students could subsequently internalise. By interviewing parents of primary school students in China, Zou et al. [13] found that parents highly value academic results regardless of social status. All parents believe education is crucial to enhancing students' social status, and one-third believe that education is critical to a child's entire life. Fong's [8] qualitative data support the idea that students internalise parental beliefs: primary school students from Hong Kong described how they became driven by the idea that achieving perfect standards is essential for themselves due to parental influence. Significant associations are also found among mainland students between parental standards and students' personal standards, and between the family's and students' perceived discrepancy between standards and performance [19]. Both quantitative and qualitative data support the internalisation of parents' expectations in students, which may be prevalent throughout China.

Beyond expectations, parenting styles may also play a role in shaping children's perfectionistic orientation. Chan et al. [20] adopted a cross-sectional, self-report design to understand the impact of

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parenting styles on perfectionism and worrying among children aged between 8 and 12 years. Authoritative parenting was found to buffer against worry, while permissive parenting was found to exacerbate it. No significant moderating effect was found for authoritarian parenting.

Notably, while parents set high standards for their children, they appear to be responsive to children's needs. Huang and Prochner [21] found that, using self-report data, most parents of 177 grade 4 students were characterised as authoritative, combining strictness with responsiveness. Likewise, adopting a mixed-method approach, Xie and Li [22] discovered parents of children between 5 and 6 years old were mostly authoritative, with 84% of mothers and 84% of fathers classified as such. The commonness of authoritative parenting coincides with that of adaptive perfectionism among primary school students, suggesting that setting high standards for children while being responsive to their needs could cultivate adaptive perfectionism and buffer against adverse psychological outcomes.

4. Discussion

In response to the global rise in perfectionism, the present review synthesises literature examining perfectionism within the Chinese educational context and focuses on primary school students. This study highlights three main findings. Firstly, adaptive perfectionism is likely to be the most prevalent perfectionism type among this population, characterised by self-compassion and acceptance of mistakes. Secondly, findings suggest that parental expectations are prominent in influencing students' perfectionism. Thirdly, authoritative parenting is found to be the most common parenting style in China, which could buffer against children's worrying tendency.

4.1. Adaptive perfectionism in the Chinese culture

A potential factor for the pervasiveness of adaptive perfectionism in Chan [16] is Confucianism. Confucianism belongs to the macrosystem, which affords meaning to activities and events. For instance, many anecdotes and aphorisms from collections of Confucian teachings highlight self-cultivation and self-perfection [8]. Consequently, effort is a distinctive attribute of Chinese learners [8]; the qualitative analysis of Fong [8] demonstrates this concrete belief in those students, in that the students are motivated to pursue perfection continuously.

Moreover, Confucianism's emphasis on reflecting on mistakes might be another reason for the dominance of adaptive perfectionism. Such teachings are conveyed by parents, which are then internalised in Chinese primary school students, allowing them to view failures more rationally, thereby adopting adaptive perfectionism [8]. Despite the rise of meritocracy in China, such a mindset enables them to be more motivated to pursue academic success. Indeed, the ability to correctly interpret failures is a significant predictor of academic motivation [23], suggesting that promoting such ability could cultivate a student to become an adaptive perfectionist in an intense academic environment.

4.2. Parenting and perfectionism

In addition to culture, the salience of the microsystem – parents – should also be highlighted. Abundant literature from the West supports the role of parents in shaping perfectionism [5,14,24-26]. Similarly, in China, the emphasis on perfection in academic achievement and the idea of learning from mistakes are transmitted from parents to children through lecturing and involvement in children's academic life [8,18], further reinforcing this link within the Chinese educational

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context. Notably, while parental expectations could be viewed as a source of pressure by students, thus being a contributor to maladaptive perfectionism in Western literature, these expectations are perceived as a sign of love and care in Confucianism, facilitating the adoption of adaptive perfectionism among Chinese children [8,14]. Additionally, Xie and Li [22] suggest that the ideal parenting style from the West, authoritative parenting, gained popularity in China during the process of globalisation. The adoption of the parenting style and its link with perfectionism illustrate the intricate link between the human organism and the micro- and macrosystem.

However, research on Chinese primary school students remains scarce. Unlike Chan et al. [20], authoritarian parenting may promote maladaptive perfectionism among university students and adolescents [27,28]. Nonetheless, the lack of research stimulates the present review to identify the potential contributors to perfectionism among Chinese primary school students. Likewise, this discrepancy should prompt future researchers to continue this line of research, as the destructive role of authoritarian parenting in children's development is well documented [27].

4.3. Practical implications

Adaptive perfectionism among Chinese primary school students has been suggested to yield positive psychological outcomes. At the microsystem level, training could be designed to help parents foster authoritative parenting, enabling them to adeptly respond to students' needs while cultivating good learning habits among students. Additionally, both parents and teachers should reframe mistakes as opportunities for self-improvement. Home and classroom learning should highlight the importance of effort and reflection to facilitate the development of adaptive perfectionism and mitigate maladaptive perfectionism.

4.4. Limitations and future directions

The existing literature has three limitations. Firstly, the studies adopted a cross-sectional design, meaning that the findings are unlikely to firmly establish causality. A longitudinal study designed by Damian and colleagues [5] yielded insight into the onset of perfectionism in relation to parenting style by tracking the development of students aged between 15 and 19 years old. Future studies could adopt a similar design to provide a more concrete understanding of causality between parenting and perfectionism in the Chinese educational context. Secondly, the studies are over-reliant on quantitative, self-report measures, limiting the insight into the underlying reasons for perfectionism in China. Moreover, while Xie and Li [22] employed a mixed-method design, the researchers reported cases of incongruence between parents' interviews and questionnaire responses, suggesting that future studies should use triangulation to yield more valid results. Thirdly, the present review drew primarily on studies published before 2020, as few studies have examined the patterns of perfectionism in China during a period of cultural shifts in education [3]. This implies that previously identified patterns could have changed under the new educational context. Due to the associated mental health challenges that this personality trait poses, the author urges researchers to pay more attention to relevant issues so that the challenges can be addressed.

5. Conclusion

The present study reviews perfectionism among Chinese primary school students by examining the influence of parenting and culture. Evidence suggests that adaptive perfectionism is most prevalent among this population. Several factors may have contributed to this phenomenon, including culture,

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parental expectations, and parenting styles. Although the present review relied on older findings, the existing findings provide strong support for the relation between parenting and perfectionism among Chinese primary school students. To help students foster adaptive perfectionism, parents and teachers are advised to promote Confucian values, which highlight effort and continuous self-improvement. Moreover, parents could engage in interventions that facilitate the adoption of authoritative parenting, enabling them to assist their children in achieving desirable psychological and academic outcomes.

By situating the findings within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the manifestation of the macrosystem through the microsystem is illustrated vividly. The theory explains how Confucian values are transmitted to students, with parents being a prominent agent in the microsystem. Understanding the pathway of transmission of ideology is particularly important due to the cultural shift that China is experiencing. To buffer against the mental health uncertainty posed by meritocracy, future studies are suggested to focus on perfectionism and employ various methodologies to gain a deeper understanding of perfectionism. Such an effort will enable researchers to understand ways in which positive perfectionism can be promoted, while minimising the impact of negative perfectionism among Chinese students.

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