

Perfectionism of gifted students' long term psychological impact: A qualitative study

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Article Information:

Received : January 19, 2026

Revised : January 29, 2026

Published : June 1, 2026

Keywords:

perfectionism; psychological impact; gifted student

Abstract

Gifted students often perform under pressure and high expectations while also carrying perfectionistic standards. This study analyzes the psychological impact on gifted students and giftedness program alumni with high perfectionism. The research design used a phenomenological study and utilized a purposive sampling technique on five subjects. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, using thematic analysis assisted by NVivo 12 software. Validity testing in this study included journal reflections during the thematic analysis process and data triangulation. The results of this study indicate that there are short-term and long-term impacts. Both are the accumulation of perfectionism that continues to emerge and continues to become neurotic perfectionism.

Introduction

Gifted students are often dubbed "the most resilient" or "the strongest" due to their resilience in learning, rapid grasp of material, academic achievement, and above-average problem-solving abilities (Sak, 2023). However, behind this "perfection" lies a paradoxical reality, such as an ecosystem that demands constant effort to achieve success. Other factors include curriculum acceleration, repeated competitions, parental and teacher expectations, and social comparisons with fellow gifted students (Ayaydin et al., 2023).

In such circumstances, perfectionism begins to take root, not as a healthy standard, but as a way of interpreting oneself and the world. Self-worth depends on achievement, and mistakes become perceived as a threat to identity, rather than a learning process (Papandreou, 2023). At some point, these recurring circumstances can lead to physical and psychological impacts, such as emotional exhaustion, academic exhaustion, and the emergence of distress.

The literature on giftedness has long highlighted the paradox of "high achievement with hidden fragility." Many quantitative studies have documented the correlation between perfectionism and other psychological symptoms (Birch et al., 2019). However, qualitative understanding remains limited, particularly exploring how perfectionism shapes self-narratives, relationships with significant others, and why some students are able to mitigate it while others struggle with it into adulthood. This gap is crucial because it provides a baseline for designing counseling interventions. The effectiveness of counseling, supported by correlational numbers, still requires an understanding of the process, flow of events, and psychological meanings so that prevention and treatment strategies can be tailored to the realities of the students, their learning ecosystem, and their environment.

The social and cultural context contributes to these dynamics (Türkman, 2020). In some families, academic achievement is not simply a measure of ability but also a symbol of hope, social mobility, and even family honor. In schools, the ecosystem of evaluation and assessment fosters comparisons that inadvertently deepen the intrinsic message that self-worth is derived from numbers. When failure and declining performance occur, or unavoidable circumstances arise in the process of achieving these goals (Banat et al., 2020; Maree, 2022; Wahab, 2010), perfectionism can make it difficult for individuals to compromise with limitations, delay or even seek help, and even withdraw from sources of support. Conversely, if the environment/ecosystem supports achievement, such as working under pressure that normalizes the idea of "continuous progress," distress can emerge (Flett et al., 2024). These situations are rarely captured by relying solely on numerical instruments without examining the stories and meanings behind them.

Based on this need, this study aims to understand the short- and long-term psychological impacts of perfectionism on gifted students through a qualitative lens. More specifically, this study attempts to map how perfectionism, especially self-demands and social demands, shape emotional dimensions, self-dimensions, and psychological dynamics (Gunawan et al., 2025; Kuusi et al., 2024; Stoeber & Childs, 2011).

Practically, the output of this research is projected to be the basis for developing multi-level prevention programs in schools, counseling that focuses on perfectionism, and communication guidelines for parents and teachers to create feedback that focuses on the achievement process, not the results of achievement.

Methods

This research employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. This approach aimed to describe the meaning of the lived experiences of the individuals involved, employing statistical analysis techniques. This phenomenological approach is based on Husserl, who explained that an individual's personal experience within the "lifeworld" encompasses all events, occurrences, and memories (Creswell, 2013). This encompasses the individual's sensory-motor, emotional, and cognitive aspects. Although individuals possess an element of subjectivity, in some situations, intersubjectivity can be fostered, stemming from a sense of shared belonging.

This research focused on interpreting and in-depth explaining the experiences of gifted students who fall within the neurotic perfectionism spectrum. The subjects included: 1) students/formal education graduates, 2) aged 15-30, and 3) those who had experienced neurotic perfectionism.

The sampling method used purposive sampling. Subjects were selected intentionally based on the research criteria. This process lasted throughout 2024 and resulted in the selection of four subjects.

This study emphasized an in-depth understanding of experiences, perspectives, and self-worth. Exploring aspects of perfectionism required active engagement with participants, thus prioritizing a small sample size. The number of subjects was considered based on the dynamic

characteristics of gifted students, who range from high levels of perfectionism to neurosis. The small sample size facilitated a more in-depth and complex analysis.

The data collection technique used was in-depth semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide designed by the researcher. Data analysis employed thematic analysis techniques (Husserl et al., 2021), which consist of three stages: 1) coding, 2) grouping codes into categorization and determining themes, and 3) structuring themes into a concept map. NVivo 12 software was used to organize the coding and categorization results.

Validity in this study was assessed through credibility and confirmability. During the thematic analysis, the researcher also conducted journal reflections, recording initial interpretations. Furthermore, researchers continuously cross-checked data with the sample to ensure consistency. Furthermore, this study adhered to research procedures, such as requesting consent from the sample and providing an initial explanation of the research procedures.

Results

The four interviewed subjects revealed their experiences as individuals with the "gift" of giftedness and a high sense of perfectionism. Gifted students are inherently gifted with high academic abilities and meticulousness in their work. Furthermore, high standards are also a part of their daily lives. Because this is a daily reality, gifted individuals feel that this is the rule of life. They believe that doing something must be perfect and result in success, without feeling that it falls into the neurotic category.

This situation continues to repeat itself, leading to a similar lifestyle. As Subject 1 explained, when given an assignment by the teacher, he would set his own standards, even though the teacher had already set them. Subject 1 would not be satisfied if his results did not outperform his classmates, at least by one point in the class, or even when compared to other classes, he would strive to be the best. Subject 1's value standards were also shared by subjects 2, 3, and 4. They all had perfect standards exceeding those set by their teachers. Subject 4 added that in a work situation, if a superior does not provide a target, subject 4 is uncomfortable with the situation, so he sets his own targets with the expectation that his "superior" will be very satisfied with his performance.

The perfect standards the subjects themselves created were also supported by their parents. Behind this research subject's resilience in achieving success was a family ecosystem that encouraged them to strive for greater heights. Subject 2 revealed that in addition to setting standards for themselves, their parents frequently reinforced the belief that success is directly proportional to relentless effort, and that minimizing failure requires greater effort than others typically require. This situation motivated Subject 2 to strive for greater heights than others. Subject 2 also frequently checked his work repeatedly to ensure that the results met his personal expectations and the frameworks set by others. This experience is illustrated in Table 1.

Subject 4 also explicitly revealed a feeling of discomfort, leading to a fear of making mistakes when working, which led to a desire to constantly criticize his performance. This was further reinforced by Subject 3, who revealed that the constant revisions sometimes delayed submission, extending the deadline to 3-4 days, resulting in work that should have been submitted in two days. This was due to dissatisfaction with the results, fear of evaluation/mistakes, and a desire to consistently appear perfect in all aspects.

The experiences shared by the subjects revealed physical impacts experienced by all subjects, including dizziness, nausea, and fatigue, even after sleeping. Subject 2 also revealed that she often pushed herself to continue completing tasks even when conditions were challenging. Consequently, despite the health impacts, Subject 2 overlooked this.

This was not unique to Subject 2; Subjects 1, 3, and 4 also experienced similar issues. The physical impact of frequently neglected tasks and work led the subjects in this study to

accept this as normal. Rather than serving as a reminder, they continued to work at a high standard.

The results of this study demonstrate the complexity of the psychological dynamics of perfectionism in gifted students. In general, the conceptual flow consists of three phases: first, the meaning of perfectionism in each research subject; second, the physical and psychological responses and their short-term impact; and third, the steps of adjustment and adaptation to the perfectionism situation.

Table 1 Deskripsi Perfeksionisme

Subject	Gender	Age	Origin	Description of Perfectionism
Subyek 1	Female	15	Malang, Jawa Timur	Subject 1's perfectionism was characterized by persistent overestimation of himself and the belief that his work or assignments weren't good enough to submit. Subject 1 strongly desired to be the top student in his class. Furthermore, Subject 1 frequently questioned teachers and requested feedback on submitted answers and assignments to minimize potential errors.
Subyek 2	Female	17	Malang, Jawa Timur	Subject 2 was an outstanding student in his class. His perfectionism seemed to increase as he entered high school. He frequently participated in various competitions, both academic and non-academic. He also had a desire to excel due to parental pressure. He felt unprepared for negative assessments in every assignment and task, leading him to continually provide corrections.
Subyek 3	Female	21	Surabaya, Jawa Timur	Subject 3's perfectionism affects his physical well-being. He often has trouble sleeping at night, severely reducing his rest time. He has a highly competitive spirit, believing that if he doesn't try hard, nothing will end in success. Subject 3 often takes on many projects on campus because he feels empty if he isn't busy with something every day. Subject 3 also often receives advice from those around him about how to work on a daily basis, but he ignores it. Furthermore, subject 3 feels that when assignments are approaching the deadline, he still has to complete them to a perfect standard even though it is physically impossible.
Subyek 4	Male	31	Malang, Jawa Timur	Subject 4 was an outstanding student during his school years and won the National Geography Olympiad. He also grew up in a highly competitive school environment. However, at a certain point, Subject 4 was unable to achieve results commensurate with his high academic abilities. Subject 4 withdrew from his environment, leading to a lack of self-confidence. He then continued on to university, where he rediscovered himself. However, his perfectionism

Subject	Gender	Age	Origin	Description of Perfectionism
				remained high. Subject 4 often delayed submitting work because he felt there would be more additions and revisions, which ultimately resulted in delays. However, Subject 4 began to realize that the perfectionism he had valued could trigger fear and anxiety. The discrepancy between reality and expectations sometimes caused anxiety and disrupted emotional stability.

Table 2 Theme and Category

Category	Sub Theme
Theme:	1. Hyper-Monitoring/Overchecking 2. Procrastination/Perfectionism 3. Emotional Tension 4. Sleep Disturbances 5. Self-Criticism
	1. Burn Out 2. Anxiety 3. Depression 4. Underachievement 5. Fragile Self Meaning

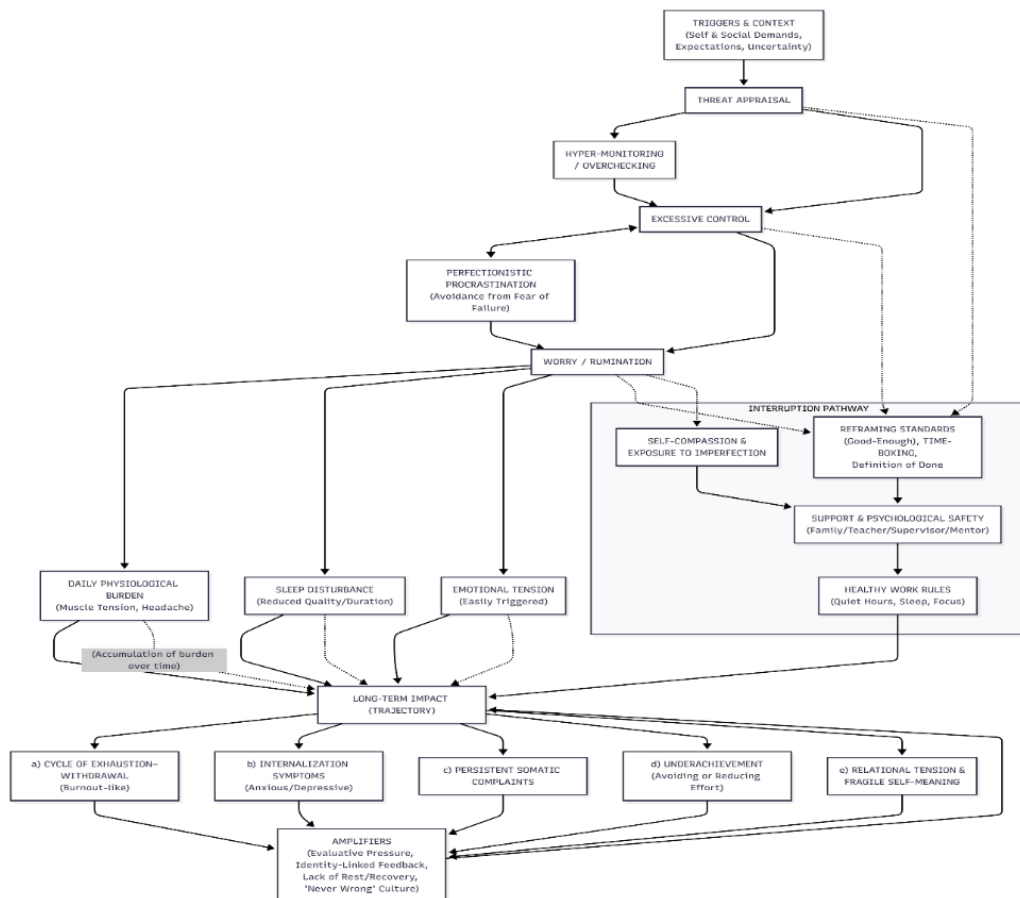


Figure 1 Psychological Dynamic of Perfectionism

Hiper-Monitoring/Overchecking

Every job and task requires monitoring by oneself and others. However, gifted individuals, on the other hand, repeatedly check their work, leading to redundant processes.

"...I have a ritual where if I want to submit an assignment, I have to check it at least 3 times, the maximum is countless.." (W1.S2.031)

Another subject also said something similar, but more focused on the substance of their assignments.

"...like when participating in a competition, I will ensure that there are no minor issues that will derail the competition. I will repeatedly check and review" (W1.S3.130).

"I will also revise small things if I feel they will impact my work, and not just once or twice, but repeatedly until I feel it's just right" (W1.S4.190).

Procrastination Perfectionism

Procrastination is essentially due to an individual's inability to complete the demands or tasks, but it's different for gifted students. In gifted individuals, procrastination doesn't stem from personal incompetence, but rather from a feeling that they haven't yet reached the standard of perfection they desire.

"I once submitted an assignment late because I felt like I wasn't quite ready for the job, and it turned out to be the deadline. I felt like I wasn't perfect enough, so I put it off, even though I'd already finished it long ago." (W1.S3.072)

Subject 4 also experienced a similar incident that resulted in her not qualifying for the national competition.

"At the time, I put it off because I thought I still had time to add some things and aspects to make it look good and perfect. But in reality, I submitted it late, so I didn't pass the initial selection." (W1.S4.197)

Emotional Tension

Emotional tension is a state of increased affective arousal (tension, irritability, and irritation) when faced with assessments or standards. This was also experienced by the subjects in this study.

"When I'm working on assignments, I often get irritated even though I only made one mistake, so it's difficult to talk to them when they're already focused on the task" (W1.S2.176)

Similar to other subjects who also felt the same way.

"When I'm a perfectionist, my emotions are limited. Happiness is probably rare; I'm just tense, nervous, or irritated with myself." (W1.S4.154)

Sleep Disturbances

Sleep disturbances refer to changes in sleep patterns and quality related to pressures of perfectionism or evaluation, such as insomnia, early awakening, restless sleep, and dreams about work or assignments.

"If I have a presentation tomorrow, I'm so anxious I can't sleep until nighttime. I keep wondering if my slides cover all the material or if there's something missing." (W1.S2.150)

"My sleep is fragmented, waking up at 2 a.m., double-checking my competition script, and only getting back to sleep around dawn." (W1.S3.176)

Another subject who felt the same way expressed it:

"It's much better now, but when I have a big project, my sleep pattern is still easily messed up. The difference is, I've learned how to reverse the rhythm, even though I'm trying to figure it out myself." (W1.S4.087)

Self -Criticism

Self-criticism refers to the tendency to judge oneself harshly and comprehensively when results don't meet standards, such as saying, "I'm not capable enough, I failed." This isn't a comprehensive evaluation, but rather an overestimation of the event and self-blame.

"A voice in my head says, 'You should have done better.' It seems like it never ends." (W1.S1.121)

"I often tell myself, 'Is that even wrong?'" (W1.S3.133)

Burn Out

A pattern of persistent emotional exhaustion, resulting in decreased performance due to prolonged and sustained high demands.

"I've never been completely bored, but when I do get really bored, it's because I'm repeating the same thing over and over again." (W1.S1.127)

"I've been in a state of emptiness, doing things but feeling like I don't feel anything. I think that was my toughest phase." (W1.S3.146)

Similarly, another subject experienced the same thing.

"I used to be so burnt out that I didn't even feel like getting up in the morning. But now it's much better because I know my limits and say enough is enough." (W1.S4.199)

Anxiety

A simultaneous worry about how others perceive me, accompanied by physical symptoms (cold sweats, excessive sweating).

"When there's a competition, my hands get cold. I can only imagine what would happen if I fail." (W1.S3.145).

"My anxiety at that time was connected to perfectionism. So I felt like my head was full of endless "what ifs"." (W1.S2.131).

Depression

A longer-lasting (not just a momentary) decline in mood and interest, often accompanied by despair, can lead to repeated failures.

"I don't feel sad for a long time or anything. But if I fail, I'll be depressed all day in my room." (W1.S2.120)

"I've had really long-lasting lows. Waking up in the morning felt hard, and I felt worthless because my grades weren't the best." (W1.S3.147)

Underachievement

Actual performance results fall below potential/capacity. This is usually detected through behaviors like refusing challenging work or assignments, deliberately choosing low standards, and declining productivity.

"I once ranked 5th from the bottom, and that was the hardest part of my education" (W1.S4.175).

Furthermore, subject 3 also chose not to participate in competitions.

"I once deliberately didn't register for a competition because I was afraid I wouldn't perform at my best" (W1.S3.133).

Fragile Self Meaning

The fragile self-identity here means that the self we've always understood is highly dependent on achievement. When results don't meet expectations, our self-esteem plummets.

"I'm afraid people will see me as ordinary. So I try hard to be the 'champion' to gain prestige." (W1.S3.166)

"I feel worthy if I get perfect results; otherwise, I just feel empty." (W1.S2.122)

Discussion

The results of the study on these four subjects indicate that perfectionist individuals, especially those with talent, can have diverse impacts, not just a single pattern. In two subjects, perfectionism appeared as over-checking of details, emotional tension before evaluations, sleep disturbances, and harsh self-criticism, but it was still controlled and did not lead to neuroticism. In contrast, the other two subjects had experienced a neurotic phase characterized by deeply rooted and tolerated perfectionism, a self-definition entirely focused on achievements and numbers, and prolonged fatigue (Aydemir & Arli, 2020; Flett et al., 2024; Ip, 2025). Interestingly, both were able to emerge from this crisis phase by lowering standards, gaining social support, and limiting performance, even though their perfectionist standards remained.

Theoretically, these findings align with recent evidence distinguishing perfectionistic strivings from perfectionist concerns. In the context of gifted students, purposeful strivings can coexist with achievement, but concerns stemming more from the fear of making mistakes, social demands that constantly expect perfection, and massive self-criticism can cause psychological discomfort. Several studies have shown that perfectionism in gifted students partly demonstrates adaptive performance, while others demonstrate vulnerability to distress (Bevan Jones et al., 2017; Jemini-Gashi & Hoxha, 2024; Livana, Mubin, & Basthomi, 2020; López et al., 2025). This depends on the dominance of concerns and the ecosystem within the school and family. This study confirms this, showing that both subjects experienced crises and their recovery was supported by the ecosystem.

The mechanisms observed also demonstrate consistency with the cognitive perseverative model. When standards are perceived as threatening the "genius" identity, fearful thoughts and rumination generate stress (Flett et al., 2024). Meta-analysis results indicate that rumination and fear indeed bridge the relationship between perfectionism concerns and symptoms of depression and anxiety. In this study's subjects, this pattern was evident in "fear

of imagining failure," "procrastination because of perceived inadequacy," and "difficulty stopping even when tired."

The somatic impacts were also evident in this study. Adolescent subjects reported tension and headaches, while adult subjects reported disturbed sleep patterns. Longitudinal research shows that adolescents with high levels of perfectionism are more likely to experience insomnia, anxiety, and depression (Aydemir & Arli, 2020; Birch et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2025). Therefore, what may seem like ordinary sleep deprivation or body aches may be a warning signal for the body to change its established routine.

The relationship between perfectionism and burnout, as evidenced by interviews with subjects, is evident in longitudinal studies (Avola et al., 2025; Kuusi et al., 2024; Wright et al., 1993). As concern increases, the risk of emotional exhaustion and avoidance of tasks or pressure increases, but strivings can help prevent this. Recent research suggests that perfectionism can predict burnout dynamics over time in college students, while meta-analyses indicate that concern is positively correlated with burnout and negatively with strivings (Edú-valsania et al., 2022; Wright et al., 1993).

The findings of underachievement in these subjects support the hypothesis that, in some gifted individuals, perfectionism actually hinders the actualization of individual potential. A systematic literature review shows that underachievement in gifted students includes intrapersonal aspects, including fear of failure, which aims to frame reputation and avoid risks (Papandreou, 2023). In this case, underachievement is not "laziness," but rather an adaptive consequence leading to maladaptive behavior.

On the intervention side, recovery patterns according to subject data indicate an awareness within themselves that perfection cannot be pursued, but rather shaped to be achieved within limits. Research results indicate that socially prescribed perfectionism and self-critical perfectionism are primary targets for change, as both are related and not only susceptible to anxiety but also to the aspect of seeking help when encountering psychological difficulties, in this case, counseling (Chen et al., 2022; Dağyar et al., 2022; Ip, 2025; Philp et al., 2012). Interventions will focus on shifting the perspective of "having to be perfect to be worthy" to "being worthy while learning."

The limitations of this study primarily lie in the relatively small sample size and cultural heterogeneity. Future research could include longitudinal qualitative research incorporating measurements of sleep quality, somatic burden, burnout indicators, and performance assessments.

Conclusion

Overall, these qualitative data deepen the literature's understanding that the risk of perfectionism in gifted students is conditional: it increases when social concerns and demands dominate in contexts that are poor at recovery, but decreases when standards are managed flexibly, processes are valued, and support allows failure to become part of learning. By shifting the focus from "lowering standards" to "making standards humane and sustainable," counseling interventions in schools, colleges, and the workplace can mitigate the long-term costs of perfectionism without extinguishing the strengths that characterize gifted populations.

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