Exploring clinical perfectionism in higher education students: key recommendations and reflections on a partnership

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REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Exploring clinical perfectionism in higher education students: Key recommendations and reflections on a partnership

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The focus of this paper is two-fold—firstly, we detail the background to our project and provide reflections on the pedagogic partnership. The second focus is the key recommendations arising from our project.

BACKGROUND

Clinical perfectionism, or maladaptive perfectionism, is characterised by a reliance on "self-evaluation and the determined pursuit (and achievement) of self-imposed personally demanding standards of performance in at least one salient domain, despite the occurrence of adverse consequences" (Shafran et al., 2002, p. 1). Among 992 undergraduate psychology students attending York University (in Canada), the prevalence of perfectionistic cognitions was 25% (Pirbaglou et al., 2013), indicating perfectionistic tendencies are a concern in higher education (HE) settings. Maladaptive perfectionism has been linked to diagnosable mental health disorders (Shafran et al., 2002) and academic-specific elements such as performance indicators, motivation, and academic self-efficacy (Rice et al., 2016).

As outlined in Shafran et al. (2002), quantitative measures have been developed to assess perfectionism; however, the definitions on which these are based have varied. Therefore, there is the risk of allowing these measures to define the concept; hence, an exploratory, qualitative approach offers an alternate perspective of perfectionism, as defined by the individual who experiences it.

Considering the lived experience of perfectionism in HE students and its subsequent impact on academic study, the dean for diversity and inclusion deemed it necessary to research the impact of perfectionism on students at the University of Reading. This is because the University of Reading is focusing on supporting the mental health of students and, therefore, this study aligns with our institutional strategy.

The dean applied for student-staff partnership funding from the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP), as student-staff partnerships are central to successfully improving the student experience. The research aims were to (a) explore the experiences of students at the University of Reading who experience perfectionism and (b) create a set of recommendations to improve practice at the University of Reading from that lived experience data. The funding was approved in February 2021, and the research study took place between June and August 2021.

The research team consisted of two members of supervisory staff, one with primary academic expertise (Allan Laville, Dean for Diversity and Inclusion) and one with primary clinical expertise (Emma-Jayne Conway, Lecturer in Clinical Psychology). Holly Holtom, a student on the BSc Psychology with Professional Placement programme, was employed as an intern and had a leading role in the literature review, methodology, data collection, data analysis, and write-up of the findings. Charlie Alder was a student on the BSc Psychology programme. Charlie approached Allan about contributing to ongoing research at the university and, because of this, subsequently became a paid research assistant in clinical psychology contributing to the data analysis and write-up of the findings.

As the dean is a reflective teacher, he wanted to analyse the student-staff partnership processes and outcomes, which led the research team to writing this paper. In this paper, each member of the research team provides their reflections on the following four thematic areas: (a) the importance of shared power within a partnership; (b) how the partnership supports student voice; (c) the importance of clear communication, respect, and defined roles within the partnership; and d) the realised benefits of partnership in improving teaching and learning (T&L) in HE.

REFLECTIONS ON PEDAGOGIC PARTNERSHIP

Reflection from Allan Laville, dean for diversity and inclusion

Within HE, it is very easy to reinforce the hierarchical nature of the faculty and, therefore, perceive faculty members to be in a position of power compared to students. This action is very unhelpful as it stunts reflection and advancement within T&L practices, including the student experience. In my view, we must listen to students with lived experience in order to develop our practice—both inside and outside of the classroom. This is why it was important for me to make sure this project exploring clinical perfectionism was informed by the student voice, particularly by working with our student partners, Holly and Charlie. Holly and Charlie were instrumental in creating the study design, engaging and interviewing other students, and completing the analysis of our data. The resulting recommendations from our study have only been realised due to their diligence and commitment to the research process. Student voice was central throughout the whole study as all participants were current students at the University of Reading and so we were not making assumptions about student experience by interviewing faculty members instead.

Although I am a member of faculty, I have my own previous experience of being a student at the University of Reading; however, I need to be humble in acknowledging that I do not have experience of being a student in recent years, particularly given the impact of COVID-19 in HE. The pandemic has changed the way we work, and all parts of this study were completed remotely. Due to this, from our first online call, I needed to be aware of the power dynamic between myself as a senior faculty member and our student partners. In order to address the power dynamic, I was very open about the experience that I was

bringing to the partnership, including my own lived experience of perfectionism, but also about where the project would benefit from the expertise of our student partners and Emma-Jayne, who has a greater amount of experience in applied clinical psychology than I do. This enabled us all to define our own roles within the partnership, which led to greater productivity due to a greater sense of autonomy. The members of the team appreciated my approach as it provided an "open door" for all team members to contribute throughout the process. For example, Holly completed the literature search for the project and provided their own suggestions on how we could design the study methodology rather than it being dictated by myself, which can be common practice by some senior academics. Moreover, Emma-Jayne provided excellent insight into perfectionism within clinical practice, which developed our conversations within our team and sparked further ideas with our student partners.

If we did not utilise a partnership approach to this pedagogic research, I have no doubt that we would have suffered from a faculty-led approach that did not fully consider how best to engage student participants, a more restricted interpretation of the data, and, therefore, less impactful recommendations. I truly hope more colleagues will adopt the partnership approach to advance their own T&L practice as this approach has been instrumental for me.

Reflection from Holly Holtom, UROP student intern

My motivation for applying to the UROP scheme was, in part, due to the opportunity to work closely with those who were experienced in research. My previous experience of such was limited, restricted to involvement in earlier planning of research projects or on a significantly smaller scale. Both Allan and Emma-Jayne are significantly more experienced than myself, leading to some initial concerns that my contribution may not be as valuable and that I may have less opportunity to take the lead with the project.

In HE, staff hold a level of authority over students. They have power to make judgements regarding which arguments and points of evidence hold value. The majority of my student-lecturer interactions throughout my degree were based on this, so I was accustomed to being the individual whose contribution was under judgment and having little opportunity to disagree. Although this project was different to that of a degree assignment, those previous experiences meant I was hesitant in the very early stages to make suggestions I was unsure of or to agree with those suggested by Allan and Emma-Jayne.

However, I was consistently met with respect from Allan and Emma-Jayne and felt a valued member of the team. This allowed me to quickly feel comfortable making suggestions and know that I was able to disagree with either party without affecting the respect I was offered. My confidence increased, benefitting me personally and professionally, which meant that when either disagreed with me, this did not feel like a judgement of my overall ability but of my suggestion. I felt supported by both lLecturers who were consistently willing to answer questions, and never passed judgement. I believe open communication of their expectations of me and my ability to request support was the foundation of the success of this partnership.

When Charlie joined the project, I adjusted to share responsibility and reduce my independence and control. Having experienced the respect and value awarded to my contributions by Allan and Emma-Jayne earlier in the project, I had a greater understanding of Charlie's position in being new to the project. Therefore, I consciously ensured Charlie

fully understood the project, and I appreciated the contribution of a fresh perspective regardless of whether we agreed or disagreed, allowing the development of accurate themes.

I highly recommend a pedagogic partnership. As a student on a large course, there is limited access to the knowledge and experience of lecturers. Through this partnership I was able to gain knowledge of the research process, and Emma-Jayne's experience as a practitioner provided insight into applications on a clinical level. I assert that open communication and mutual respect are the key to the success of this partnership; this allows each individual to feel valued and negates any potential impact of a hierarchy. A pedagogical partnership is an excellent opportunity for students to increase their skills, knowledge, and confidence in a way that is not possible in lectures.

Reflection from Emma-Jayne Conway, Lecturer in clinical psychology

I was initially drawn to the concept of pedagogical partnership due to it being a collaborative process between staff and students, which was a relatively new way of working for me. I was aware of pre-existing assumptions commonly held within institutions that students are the recipients of learning from staff members and wondered if this may manifest as staff members leading the project and students being more passive in the process. However, I was pleased to see a sharing of the power dynamic within this pedagogical partnership, with students being heavily involved in every aspect of the process, including study design and data collection. For example, Allan suggested some materials on how to conduct thematic analysis, which Holly and Charlie read and then applied their learning by completing the data analysis. I believe that allowing students to use their initiative and take leadership of tasks provided them with valuable skills to equip them for employment after university.

Upon reflection, I have thoroughly enjoyed my first experience of pedagogical partnership. As I come from a clinical (rather than research) background, I was apprehensive and wondered how much value I could bring to the project. I recognise that these anxieties about making a meaningful contribution may also have been experienced by the students; therefore, I was keen to be open about this by stating my inexperience of pedagogical research and how this process was a learning curve for me also. I hope that these self-disclosures were encouraging for the students and helped to break down any perceived power dynamics. I found that the variety of experience within the team allowed for wonderful discussions around both pedagogical and clinical applications of our findings.

The partnership has certainly heightened my appreciation for listening to the student voice in order to inform the T&L experience. I would highly recommend colleagues engage in partnership working with students, as including the ideas of a variety of stakeholders (in this instance, staff and students) provides a far richer and meaningful process than staff input alone. I plan to share this project with my fellow educators on the clinical postgraduate courses in our team meetings so that we can think collectively about how to include the student voice in the T&L experience. I hope this may also inspire colleagues to apply for UROP funding at the University of Reading.

Reflection from Charlie Alder, research assistant in clinical psychology

My understanding of a pedagogical partnership is when staff and students work together to improve T&L. Additionally, this partnership ensures power is shared between all individuals regardless of whether they are a student or staff. This is most compelling about

the partnership as it allows for students' ideas to be explored rather than ignored. Whilst not all staff ignore students' ideas, students often feel more confident and willing to actively voice their thoughts when power is shared within the partnership. It is also exciting to be given the opportunity to potentially help future students whilst working in an environment where your ideas are listened to and encouraged.

Initially I felt nervous embarking on this project. These nerves were due to my lack of prior experience partaking in a research project outside of lab reports in my research methods modules. As I had very limited experience, I was unsure if I had sufficient skills to be a part of a research team. Additionally, I was apprehensive about joining the team at a later stage of the project. However, once Allan offered me the opportunity to be a part of this project, he organised a meeting with the whole team. I found this particularly helpful in calming my nerves as I was able to meet the team I'd be working with, be informed on their roles, and discuss the next steps for the project. This not only gave me a better understanding of the project but also helped me feel more confident about carrying out the discussed next steps. In addition to that important first meeting, I also met separately with Holly, who had joined the project at the start, in order to discuss how responsibility would now be shared between us. Holly ensured I fully understood the project before we began to equally contribute to transcribing, coding, and the discussion of themes. This separate meeting allowed me to understand Holly's methods and adapt my own methods to maintain consistency.

Throughout the project I felt supported by all members of the team as they helped me to realise I was more than capable of carrying out the tasks asked of me and encouraged me to ask questions. I believe this communication allowed for the research and write-up process to be easier and clearer.

My overall advice for others interested in such partnership work would be to embark on such a project. To students, I would advise they do not allow their own fears about conducting research to prevent them from partaking. This is because the support provided can help you as a student to realise your capabilities and potential as a researcher. To staff, I would advise they ensure they offer students sufficient support and check in regularly throughout the partnership. This is beneficial to prevent students from feeling overwhelmed or unconfident. Lastly, to both students and staff, I would suggest they continuously develop a realistic plan with flexible deadlines throughout the partnership work as it definitely plays a large role in ensuring the whole project runs smoothly.

KEY THEMES ARISING FROM THE PROJECT DATA

Ten students completed an interview to discuss their experiences of perfectionism when they were studying at the University of Reading. The main findings showed a high prevalence of thinking biases, for example, "if one thing goes wrong, everything is going wrong. A student might be objectively meeting their goals overall; however, if one assignment receives a lower mark than expected, the student perceives this as a fail to meet their overall goals. This was often accompanied by thoughts of "everything must be my absolute best" with little room for error. This results in experiences of stress, anxiety, and, in some cases, avoidance.

Students also discussed the negative impact of others on their perfectionism, for example, views held by family members about what excellence is and the significance given to others' views of oneself. We also found that comparison with others is a trigger for perfectionist tendencies, and this is discussed further below.

HE recommendations

We make two recommendations for future practice.

Recommendation 1

Based on the evidence that comparisons with others can be a trigger for perfectionist tendencies, we recommend that HE institutions remove processes that publicly compare one student's performance with the performance of another student (e.g., marks and grades for all students presented publicly to a cohort via a results board) and that they ensure that regular interactions take place with individual students about their own goals and not assumed goals by the lecturer.

Recommendation 1 can be realised by discussing individual results only with the student in question, as class ranking or comparison with peers is unhelpful. This could be facilitated in 1:1 tutorials, such as regularly scheduled academic tutorials.

Recommendation 2

Based on the evidence that individuals with perfectionism are more likely to have focussed attention on negative feedback, we suggest that HE institutions ensure that academic staff receive appropriate marker training to ensure that balanced feedback is provided to students for each assignment (e.g., a balanced review of 2 strengths and two weaknesses in qualitative feedback). We also suggest that institutions provide tutorials to support students in effectively processing their feedback and reducing the focus on negative feedback.

Recommendation 2 can be realised by providing marker training at a modular level delivered by an experienced marker who is aware of the module context. Whilst this action does require more initial faculty resource, there are realised long-term benefits to the student experience that Allan has experienced within his own practice. With increased assessment literacy, faculty members will be better equipped to provide good quality feedback tutorials to students. These tutorials will support students to focus on all of their feedback and enable a holistic review.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the first focus of this paper, we structured our reflections on the following four themes to address the construction and importance of pedagogic partnerships: (a) the importance of shared power within a partnership; (b) how the partnership supports student voice,; (c) the importance of clear communication, respect, and defined roles within the partnership; and (d) the realised benefits of partnership in improving T&L in HE.

To reflect on the second focus of this paper, our recommendations contribute directly to supporting the experience of students with clinical perfectionism in HE.

We hope this paper has inspired you to engage in pedagogic partnership, as such partnerships benefit students, staff, and the HE sector.

The research study was approved by the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR/S

Allán Laville *is the dean of diversity and inclusion and associate professor of clinical psychology at the University of Reading and specializes in mental health of higher education students.*

Holly Holtom *is an undergraduate student at the University of Reading.*

Emma-Jayne Conway *is a lecturer in clinical psychology at the University of Reading and specializes in cognitive behavioural therapy.*

Charlie Alder *is an undergraduate student at the University of Reading.*

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