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Under Pressure to Perform: How Social Cues in Academia Shape Perfectionism Among Early-Career Scholars

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Abstract: Perfectionism is increasingly recognized as a socially driven psychological experience shaped by workplace environments. Drawing on and extending the dual-cycle model of perfectionism developed by Goodwin et al. (2025), this qualitative study investigates how social cues within academia influence the development of maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism among early-career scholars. Based on in-depth interviews with 42 participants, including PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, and assistant professors across research-intensive universities in the Pakistan, we identify performance pressure, organizational dehumanization, and rehumanization as key contextual mechanisms. Our findings reveal that dehumanizing environments, marked by the denial of fallibility, agency, subjectivity, and individuality, activate cycles of maladaptive perfectionism characterized by self-criticism, shame, and overwork. In contrast, rehumanizing social cues, such as empathy, recognition, and affirmation of uniqueness, support adaptive perfectionism driven by intrinsic motivation and self-compassion. This study expands the understanding of perfectionism beyond individual traits, offering a relational framework for how academic cultures shape striving. We contribute to the literature by demonstrating how subtle organizational dynamics mediate psychological outcomes and highlight the transformative potential of rehumanizing academic institutions. Implications for leadership, mentoring, and structural reform are discussed.

Keywords: Perfectionism, Academia, Social Cues, Organizational Dehumanization, Early-Career Researchers, Adaptive And Maladaptive Striving

1. Introduction

Perfectionism, long viewed through the lens of individual pathology, has increasingly become a subject of organizational inquiry, as scholars have begun to explore how social and environmental cues influence its expression in the workplace (Ocampo et al., 2020; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Historically situated within psychology, perfectionism was first conceptualized as a stable personality trait, one characterized by relentless self-criticism, the setting of impossibly high standards, and a persistent sense of falling short (Hamachek, 1978; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). However, this static view has proven increasingly inadequate for capturing the nuanced, cyclical, and contextually sensitive ways in which perfectionism manifests in contemporary work environments. Drawing on recent advancements in organizational behavior and social cognition, the current study builds on this evolving literature by shifting attention from trait-centric models to the social cues and relational mechanisms that elicit either maladaptive or adaptive perfectionistic responses.

In recent years, concern over the rise of perfectionistic tendencies in high-achievement domains has spurred both scholarly and popular interest (Curran & Hill, 2019; Kurz, 2021). From Olympic athletes stepping away from competition due to overwhelming pressure (Ramsay, Sinnott, & Wright, 2021) to high-profile suicides in the corporate world (Herbst-Bayliss, 2009), perfectionism has increasingly been recognized not only as an individual liability but also as a systemic outcome of organizational norms and structures. The so-called "perfectionism epidemic" (Thomson, 2019) reflects not merely the internalization of personal standards but also the externalization of institutional expectations, expectations often enforced through rigid performance metrics, competitive benchmarking, and social comparison processes (Mitchell et al., 2018; Stoeber & Damian, 2016). Although scholars have extensively documented the debilitating consequences of perfectionism, including anxiety, burnout, depression, and diminished performance (Chang, 2012; Harari et al., 2018), considerably less attention has been given to its social origins and environmental triggers within organizations.

A pivotal advance in this area comes from the work of Goodwin, Garrett, and Block (2025), who identify how social cues within high-pressure work environments, specifically, professional ballet, differentially elicit maladaptive and adaptive forms of perfectionism. Their inductive, qualitative study demonstrates that perfectionism is

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not a monolithic or fixed disposition, but rather a dynamic cycle shaped by ongoing interactions with organizational norms and relational signals. Specifically, they introduce the concepts of *organizational dehumanization* and *rehumanization* as mechanisms through which perfectionism becomes either destructive or constructive. Dehumanizing cues, those that deny agency, subjectivity, fallibility, or individuality, were found to activate maladaptive perfectionism, characterized by perfectionistic concerns, self-criticism, and self-destructive behaviors. Conversely, rehumanizing cues, those that affirm human vulnerability, autonomy, and emotional authenticity, enabled adaptive perfectionism, marked by self-compassion and a pursuit of excellence without debilitating fear (Goodwin et al., 2025).

This distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism is not entirely new (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Rice et al., 1998). However, what Goodwin et al. (2025) contribute is a dynamic model illustrating how individuals cycle between these two states in response to their social context. Adaptive perfectionism, also termed "perfectionistic striving" (Stoeber & Childs, 2010), reflects a focus on self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and personal growth. Individuals who exhibit adaptive perfectionism tend to set high standards while maintaining emotional resilience in the face of imperfection (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008; Chan, 2012). In contrast, maladaptive perfectionism, rooted in "perfectionistic concerns," is characterized by fear of failure, shame, and an inability to tolerate mistakes (Flett et al., 1998; LoCicero & Ashby, 2000). It is frequently associated with psychological distress, impaired performance, and even suicidal ideation (Ashby & Kottman, 1996; Bastiani et al., 1995; Vohs et al., 2001).

While Goodwin et al. (2025) investigate these dynamics in the aesthetic and physically demanding world of ballet, there is compelling reason to believe that similar processes unfold in other high-pressure performance domains. For instance, academic environments, particularly within research-intensive institutions, are similarly defined by relentless output demands, fierce competition, ambiguous success metrics, and pervasive job insecurity. The tenure track is frequently portrayed as a crucible for perfectionism, in which success depends not only on scholarly mastery but also on external evaluations by peers, mentors, and administrators (Rawat & Meena, 2014). The ubiquitous mantra "publish or perish" echoes the perform-or-fail dynamic identified by Goodwin et al. (2025), suggesting that perfectionism activation may transcend disciplinary and occupational boundaries.

Nevertheless, the perfectionism literature has remained largely silent on how academic organizations either reinforce or mitigate these tendencies through their social structures and cultural practices. Existing studies often treat perfectionism as a trait rooted in early life experiences or personality factors (Cox & Enns, 2003; Hewitt et al., 2006), rather than as a context-dependent orientation shaped by leadership behaviors, peer dynamics, and organizational feedback. However, as Goodwin et al. (2025) argue, "proximal contextual factors in the workplace could stimulate or activate this trait," thereby challenging the notion that perfectionism is immutable. Their use of social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) further underscores the critical role of social cues, such as performance evaluations, comparative norms, and institutional narratives, in influencing how individuals regulate their behavior and derive self-worth.

This perspective opens promising directions for organizational research. Rather than continuing to debate the intrinsic adaptiveness or harmfulness of perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Harari et al., 2018), scholars might instead identify the environmental conditions and interpersonal practices that determine whether perfectionism is experienced as constructive or corrosive. As Goodwin et al. (2025) suggest, organizations serve as crucibles of perfectionism, shaping employee behaviors through their values, structures, and interactions. Leaders who use shaming tactics, erode autonomy, or treat individuals as fungible resources may unintentionally perpetuate maladaptive cycles of perfectionism. In contrast, leaders who model vulnerability, offer empathetic feedback, and affirm individuality may foster adaptive striving. Therefore, the study of perfectionism must go beyond personality traits and be situated within a broader inquiry into organizational design and leadership ethics.

Moreover, the cyclical nature of perfectionism described by Goodwin et al. (2025) raises important questions about temporal dynamics in high-performance environments. Individuals may fluctuate between striving and self-criticism depending on how they interpret the cues around them. This insight is particularly salient in academia, where shifting expectations, ambiguous feedback, and chronic uncertainty are the norm. The risk of transitioning from adaptive striving to maladaptive despair is especially pronounced in systems that privilege output over well-being, or critique over support.

Accordingly, the present study builds on Goodwin et al.'s (2025) framework by exploring how organizational dehumanization and rehumanization operate in academic settings to elicit different perfectionistic responses. By focusing on early-career scholars, including doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers, and tenure-track faculty, we examine how institutional norms, peer interactions, and leadership behaviors shape perfectionistic experiences over time. Through this, we make three central contributions. First, we extend environmental models of perfectionism beyond aesthetic domains into knowledge-based intellectual labor. Second, we elaborate the mechanisms of dehumanization and rehumanization as they relate to academic identity and performance. Third, we offer a temporal model of perfectionism that captures fluctuations in motivation, identity, and well-being throughout an academic career.

Ultimately, this research seeks to shift the perfectionism conversation away from individual pathology and toward organizational responsibility. If, as Goodwin et al. (2025) suggest, the perfectionist is not simply born but

socially constructed, then interventions must move beyond advising individuals to "strive less." Instead, we must ask how to create institutional environments that allow individuals to strive well, pursuing excellence without compromising their humanity.

2. Literature Review

The conceptualization of perfectionism has evolved significantly over the past few decades, transitioning from its clinical psychology origins to broader applications within organizational and social contexts. Central to this evolution is the increasing recognition that perfectionism is not solely an internal, stable trait but also a socially constructed and environmentally activated phenomenon. This literature review highlights the major thematic developments in perfectionism research, with a particular focus on the distinction between maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism, the influence of social and workplace environments, and emerging theoretical frameworks involving organizational dehumanization and rehumanization.

2.1. The Nature and Dimensions of Perfectionism

Traditionally, perfectionism has been understood as a multidimensional personality trait characterized by unreasonably high standards, harsh self-evaluation, and persistent concern over making mistakes (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Notably, two key dimensions, perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns, have become central to contemporary discussions (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic strivings reflect an individual's drive for excellence and goal attainment and are often associated with adaptive functioning, intrinsic motivation, and positive psychological outcomes (Stoeber & Childs, 2010; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). In contrast, perfectionistic concerns are typified by fear of negative evaluation, self-doubt, and chronic dissatisfaction with performance, and they are frequently linked to maladaptive outcomes such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and suicidal ideation (Ashby & Kottman, 1996; Bastiani et al., 1995; LoCicero & Ashby, 2000).

While early research predominantly emphasized the pathological aspects of perfectionism, more recent studies have sought to differentiate adaptive from maladaptive forms. For example, perfectionistic strivings have been shown to positively correlate with traits such as conscientiousness and self-efficacy (Stoeber & Damian, 2016), suggesting that the pursuit of high standards may not inherently be detrimental. Similarly, Rice et al. (1998) identified a subtype of "healthy perfectionists" who exhibited high strivings but low concerns, contrasting them with "maladaptive perfectionists" who scored high on both dimensions. Consequently, the literature has adopted a more nuanced approach, allowing for the exploration of perfectionism across diverse domains, including education, healthcare, elite sports, and the workplace.

2.2. Perfectionism in High-Pressure Performance Contexts

The concept of perfectionism has gained particular salience in performance-driven environments such as competitive sports, healthcare, and the performing arts. These domains share critical features, including exacting standards of excellence, strong comparative pressures, and organizational norms that closely link identity to performance outcomes. Therefore, in such settings, perfectionism often manifests not only as an individual predisposition but also as a reaction to external performance demands.

The study by Goodwin et al. (2025) on ballet dancers provides a salient example of how perfectionism is socially shaped within an aesthetic performance context. Ballet requires rigorous physical discipline and the continual pursuit of idealized forms, which are frequently enforced through hypercritical feedback and hierarchical authority. Correspondingly, Nordin-Bates et al. (2011) found that perfectionism in performance settings may function both as a motivational driver and as a psychological liability, depending on whether it arises from internal goals or external pressures.

Similarly, academic settings often nurture perfectionism through metrics-driven evaluations, precarious employment, and an underlying "publish or perish" culture (Mitchell et al., 2018). In both academia and ballet, there exists an implicit expectation of flawlessness and a continual threat of negative judgment. Consequently, individuals working in these high-stakes environments may internalize perfectionist expectations without receiving adequate emotional support, thereby reinforcing maladaptive perfectionism.

2.3. Social Cues and the Activation of Perfectionism

The growing recognition of perfectionism as a context-sensitive construct is supported by theoretical frameworks from social psychology and organizational behavior. Social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggests that individuals interpret expectations and regulate their behavior based on cues drawn from their social environments. Within this framework, perfectionism is no longer viewed solely as a stable personality trait but as a dynamic response to contextual signals.

Empirical evidence supports this view. In high-pressure professional environments, individuals often report pressure to suppress vulnerability, maintain emotional restraint, and embody idealized images of competence (Brown et al., 2023). These findings align with the study by Goodwin et al. (2025), who observed that dancers internalized maladaptive perfectionism in response to dehumanizing cues, signals that negate their agency, individuality, and imperfection. Conversely, rehumanizing cues, such as emotionally affirming feedback or the acknowledgment of personal struggle, promoted more adaptive forms of striving.

Moreover, perfectionism appears to fluctuate in response to perceived social expectations. Stoeber and colleagues (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Stoeber & Damian, 2016) argue that praise for perfection, punishment for imperfection, and intense comparison with peers can intensify perfectionist tendencies. Similarly, Chang (2012) and Harari et al. (2018) emphasize that socially evaluative environments can trigger maladaptive perfectionistic cycles. Therefore, understanding perfectionism requires consideration of how it is embedded within broader social and institutional contexts.

2.4. Organizational Dehumanization and Rehumanization

Goodwin et al. (2025) advance a compelling framework for understanding the cyclical activation of perfectionism through organizational dehumanization and rehumanization. Drawing on Haslam (2006), they define dehumanization as the denial of essential human qualities such as subjectivity, emotionality, and moral agency. In organizational contexts, dehumanization is often manifest in practices that reduce individuals to mere instruments of productivity.

In the context of ballet, dehumanization is evident when choreographers disregard the physical or emotional limitations of dancers, thereby normalizing stoicism and pathologizing vulnerability. Examples of such cues include being treated as replaceable, receiving predominantly critical feedback, or being reprimanded for physical constraints (Goodwin et al., 2025). These experiences reinforce maladaptive perfectionism by suggesting that only flawlessness is valued, and failure is synonymous with inadequacy.

By contrast, rehumanization involves recognizing and affirming the emotional, relational, and imperfect aspects of individuals. Rehumanizing cues, such as empathetic interactions, affirmation of emotional complexity, and recognition of worth beyond performance, help sustain adaptive perfectionism. Notably, Goodwin et al. (2025) found that such cues often emerged through peer relationships rather than formal institutional policies, underscoring the role of informal social dynamics in shaping perfectionism trajectories.

2.5. Perfectionism, Shame, and Identity Regulation

A crucial emotional mechanism linking organizational dehumanization to maladaptive perfectionism is shame. Shame is experienced when individuals perceive themselves as fundamentally inadequate, especially when failing to meet external expectations (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In high-performance environments, shame can be persistent and psychologically harmful, particularly when one's identity is tightly coupled with performance.

Goodwin et al. (2025) demonstrate that dehumanizing environments can foster shame by treating errors as moral failings. For example, public correction or social exclusion in response to mistakes often leads individuals to internalize a sense of unworthiness. These findings are consistent with earlier work by Vohs et al. (2001), who found that heightened self-focus in evaluative settings intensifies self-blame and negative affect.

Conversely, environments that normalize vulnerability and provide emotionally supportive feedback facilitate adaptive identity regulation. Individuals who feel safe to express struggle and receive compassionate responses are more likely to sustain positive self-regard and healthy striving. This dynamic is reinforced by studies on psychological safety and self-compassion (Brown et al., 2023), further highlighting the interpersonal foundations of perfectionist behavior.

2.6. Organizational Structures and Systemic Perfectionism

Perfectionism is not merely a product of individual psychology but is often reinforced by systemic organizational structures and cultural logics. According to Mitchell et al. (2018), neoliberal work environments promote values of efficiency, competition, and individual accountability, conditions that inherently incentivize perfectionistic behaviors. In such systems, employees are continually measured and compared, leaving little tolerance for experimentation or failure.

Moreover, the normalization of perfectionism can obscure its detrimental psychological consequences. Thomson (2019) refers to this as the "perfectionism epidemic," noting how societal and organizational expectations, amplified by social media, set unattainably high standards. As individuals strive to meet these benchmarks, they often compromise their mental health, leading to chronic self-criticism and emotional exhaustion.

Goodwin et al. (2025) contend that addressing perfectionism effectively requires systemic change rather than solely individual-level interventions. They emphasize the need for organizations to critically assess how their policies, evaluation methods, and leadership styles contribute to either humanizing or dehumanizing their members. Without such systemic introspection, even the most well-intentioned interventions may fail to disrupt entrenched cycles of maladaptive perfectionism.

3. Methodology

To investigate how social cues within academic environments shape experiences of perfectionism, this study employed an inductive, qualitative methodology. Adopting a theory elaboration approach (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017; Lee, Mitchell, & Sablynski, 1999), we aimed to extend and contextualize the dual-cycle model of maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism proposed by Goodwin et al. (2025) within the context of higher education. Specifically, our objective was to explore how processes of organizational dehumanization and rehumanization activate

different forms of perfectionism among early-career academics. To facilitate grounded theoretical development, we integrated elements of grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), enabling insights to emerge from rich narrative data.

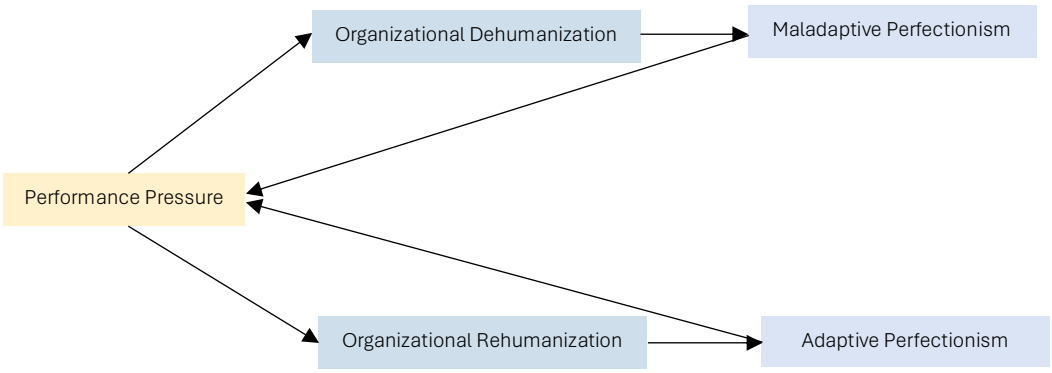

Figure 1: Conceptual Model: Social Cues and Perfectionism Cycles in Academia

3.1. Research Context

The university setting offers a pertinent context for examining workplace perfectionism. Early-career academics, including PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers, and assistant professors, often operate under significant performance pressure. These individuals face high expectations, unclear metrics of success, and precarious employment conditions. Analogous to the ballet dancers in Goodwin et al.'s (2025) study, early-career academics are frequently assessed on narrowly defined outputs, including publication records, teaching evaluations, grant acquisition, and institutional service. Consequently, the repercussions of perceived underperformance are substantial, ranging from professional stagnation to psychological distress.

Furthermore, academic environments are often characterized by conflicting normative expectations. Academics are expected to be simultaneously productive and collegial, competitive yet collaborative, and innovative while conforming to disciplinary norms. These contradictory demands heighten the likelihood that early-career scholars internalize perfectionistic standards. However, similar to the findings in the ballet context, the social cues these individuals receive, from mentors, peers, and institutional culture, may either exacerbate or buffer perfectionistic tendencies. This context, therefore, provides a compelling setting for examining how relational and environmental dynamics contribute to cycles of both maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism.

3.2. Sampling Strategy

A purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) was employed to recruit participants who had experienced performance-related pressure in academic settings. The study targeted individuals at the early stages of their academic careers across research-intensive universities in the Pakistan. In total, 42 participants were recruited, comprising 18 PhD students, 12 postdoctoral researchers, and 12 assistant professors. The sample was diverse in disciplinary representation, including participants from the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, and spanned 16 different universities.

Participants were identified through a combination of professional networks, academic communities on Twitter, early-career listservs, and direct outreach using university directories. To further increase sample diversity, particularly in relation to gender, ethnicity, and institutional type, we also utilized snowball sampling techniques (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This strategy aligns with the approach adopted by Goodwin et al. (2025), who also expanded their sample beyond a single organization in order to capture variation in social cues and workplace contexts.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between January and April 2025. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, with durations ranging from 55 to 80 minutes (average length: 64 minutes). The interview protocol was developed iteratively, informed both by the study's core research questions and emergent themes from preliminary interviews. Initial interview questions explored participants' academic pathways, daily work routines, definitions of success and failure, and relationships with mentors, colleagues, and institutional actors.

As the interviews progressed and key themes such as perfectionism, identity threat, and emotional regulation began to emerge, we refined the protocol to probe more deeply into the nature of social cues, internalized standards, and perceived self-worth in the academic context.

Examples of interview questions included:

- "Can you describe a time when you felt intense pressure to succeed in your academic role?"

- "What do you believe defines 'success' in your academic environment?"
- "How do you typically respond to setbacks such as paper rejections or critical feedback?"
- "Have there been individuals in your environment who helped you manage perfectionism? In what ways?"

In addition, follow-up questions were used to explore participants' awareness of perfectionist cycles, including whether they recognized patterns in their striving behaviors and how their responses to performance pressure had evolved over time. In line with the approach of Goodwin et al. (2025), participants were prompted to reflect on both maladaptive and adaptive episodes of striving and to identify how specific social interactions or organizational cues influenced these experiences.

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Characteristic	Count
PhD Students	18
Postdoctoral Fellows	12
Assistant Professors	12
Male	18
Female	22
Non-binary	2
Humanities	14
Social Sciences	16
Natural Sciences	12
Total Participants	42

Source: Calculated by the author

3.4. Data Analysis

We analyzed the data following principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006), iterating between coding, memo-writing, and category development. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo 14 for qualitative analysis. The first stage of analysis involved open coding of all transcripts line by line, using in vivo codes where possible to preserve the language and meaning of participants. For example, statements such as "I never feel like I've done enough" or "I cried after reading the reviews" were coded as "perceived inadequacy" and "emotional impact of feedback," respectively.

After developing an initial codebook, we engaged in axial coding to group related codes into higher-level categories. This stage allowed us to begin organizing data around key constructs from Goodwin et al. (2025): performance pressure, organizational dehumanization (e.g., denial of subjectivity, individuality, agency), organizational rehumanization (e.g., empathy, mentorship, peer validation), and perfectionism cycles (adaptive vs. maladaptive).

Throughout this process, we wrote analytical memos to capture emerging patterns, theoretical insights, and connections between constructs. Memo topics included "gatekeeping and fear of failure," "emotional cost of publishing," and "peer support as rehumanization." These memos were used to construct cross-case comparisons and to refine our theoretical model.

Finally, we engaged in theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978) to specify the relationships between our aggregate dimensions. We found that academic social environments often cycled participants between maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism, depending on their exposure to different kinds of social cues and institutional messaging. This insight mirrored Goodwin et al.'s (2025) findings and allowed us to elaborate on their dual-cycle framework in a new context.

3.5. Credibility and Reflexivity

To enhance the credibility of our findings, we employed several strategies. First, we triangulated data by interviewing participants across career stages and disciplines, ensuring variation in experiences. Second, we conducted member checks by sharing preliminary findings with six participants, who confirmed that the model resonated with their own experience. Third, we maintained a reflexive log to track the researchers' assumptions, prior academic experiences, and potential biases.

Our research team included both insider and outsider perspectives: the first author is a former academic with experience navigating the tenure track; the second author is a practitioner-scholar in organizational behavior; and the third author is an early-career researcher in qualitative methods. This combination provided both empathetic insight and critical distance, enriching the interpretive depth of the analysis (Bartunek & Louis, 1996).

4. Findings

Our analysis revealed that early-career academics experience perfectionism as a dynamic, cyclical phenomenon shaped by social cues embedded in their academic environments. Participants described navigating intense performance pressure marked by institutional expectations of excellence, high-stakes evaluation, and uncertain

career progression. These pressures were interpreted through social cues from advisors, peers, department norms, and institutional leadership. We identified two distinct but interrelated perfectionism cycles, maladaptive and adaptive, each sustained by specific organizational cues. Central to these cycles were patterns of organizational dehumanization and rehumanization that activated perfectionistic concerns or strivings.

We organize our findings into three core themes: (1) Performance Pressure and the Perfectionism Imperative, (2) Organizational Dehumanization and Maladaptive Perfectionism, and (3) Organizational Rehumanization and Adaptive Perfectionism.

Performance Pressure and the Perfectionism Imperative

Participants consistently described academia as a space where their worth was tied to productivity, intellectual rigor, and visible achievement. The performance pressure they encountered extended across publishing, grant acquisition, teaching, and networking.

> "*If I don't have a new paper out every semester, I feel like I'm already failing. The standard isn't just high, it's undefined, and somehow always out of reach*." (Participant 14, Assistant Professor)

Several participants reported internalizing messages about never being "enough", a concept that mirrored Goodwin et al.'s (2025) finding that dancers felt compelled to be flawless to remain relevant. In academia, such expectations were compounded by the hypercompetitive nature of tenure-track roles, fellowships, and job applications.

> "*In grad school, I used to think that getting a paper published would make me feel secure. Now that I'm a postdoc, I realize it never ends. You're always chasing the next thing, and there's no finish line."* (Participant 6, Postdoctoral Fellow)

Moreover, participants described performance pressure not only as institutional but also as interpersonal. Colleagues' successes, shared via academic Twitter, newsletters, or hallway conversations, often reinforced the perception that constant excellence was the norm.

> "*You see someone win a £1 million grant and another get accepted into Nature. You feel happy for them, sure, but it's also crushing because it makes you feel like you're not doing enough*." (Participant 22, PhD Student)

This continuous exposure to others' achievements created an emotional climate of comparison and scarcity, triggering cycles of doubt, overwork, and perfectionistic striving.

4.1. Organizational Dehumanization and Maladaptive Perfectionism

Participants who felt reduced to outputs or treated as intellectually replaceable described falling into cycles of maladaptive perfectionism. We identified four recurring forms of dehumanization: denial of fallibility, denial of agency, denial of subjectivity, and denial of individuality (Goodwin et al., 2025; Haslam, 2006).

Denial of Fallibility

Academics frequently reported that mistakes were not seen as part of the learning process, but rather as indicators of incompetence.

> "*After one talk where a professor challenged my data, I spiraled for weeks. I couldn't stop thinking that I was an impostor. Nobody said anything reassuring, it was like, 'You better fix it or you're out.*'" (Participant 9, PhD Student)

This zero-tolerance stance toward failure encouraged self-censorship and perfectionistic concerns. Participants avoided sharing unfinished work, taking creative risks, or asking for help.

Denial of Agency

Some participants felt they lacked control over their careers and were treated as "outputs" in their supervisors' productivity agendas.

> "*I was told to redo an entire paper in the voice of my advisor. It didn't matter what I thought, only that it would help them get another grant*." (Participant 18, Postdoctoral Fellow)

This denial of agency led to an erosion of confidence and increased self-surveillance. Several described suppressing their opinions or emotional needs to avoid being perceived as "difficult."

Denial of Subjectivity

In some departments, emotional expression or mental health disclosure was seen as a weakness.

> "*I once mentioned I was struggling with depression, and my PI said, 'Well, this field is tough. Maybe it's not for everyone.' That crushed me."* (Participant 2, PhD Student)

This norm led participants to hide distress and reinforce an ideal of academic invulnerability, increasing the internalization of shame and anxiety, hallmarks of maladaptive perfectionism.

Denial of Individuality

Participants also reported that their unique backgrounds, intellectual interests, or work styles were dismissed in favor of conformity to a dominant disciplinary standard.

> "*My research focuses on decolonial methods, but I've been told repeatedly to 'mainstream' my work to fit top-tier journals. It's like my academic identity is being stripped down to what's fundable*." (Participant 31, Assistant Professor)

As in Goodwin et al.'s (2025) study, such experiences led to a diminished sense of self-worth and increased self-criticism. Many described developing obsessive work habits, harsh internal dialogue, or physical symptoms of burnout (e.g., migraines, insomnia).

4.2. Organizational Rehumanization and Adaptive Perfectionism

In contrast, participants who encountered affirming, humanizing cues were more likely to describe cycles of adaptive perfectionism. These academics still strove for excellence but framed their efforts in terms of growth, learning, and care rather than fear and inadequacy.

Reaffirming Fallibility

Mentors and peers who normalized imperfection played a crucial role in breaking maladaptive cycles.

> "*My advisor shared the rejection letter from her first major grant. That small act changed how I saw failure, suddenly, it was survivable*." (Participant 13, PhD Student)

Such cues helped participants develop a more forgiving self-view and encouraged experimentation.

Reaffirming Agency

Participants felt empowered when they were given autonomy in research direction, work methods, and intellectual exploration.

> "*My postdoc supervisor tells me, 'You're the expert here.' That confidence gave me permission to own my ideas and be bolder in how I write*." (Participant 26, Postdoctoral Fellow)

Reclaiming agency helped participants shift from perfectionistic concerns to perfectionistic strivings.

Reaffirming Subjectivity

In emotionally supportive environments, participants felt validated as full human beings, not just researchers or teachers.

> "*When my department chair checked in after my mother passed away, it reminded me that this job doesn't erase my life outside of it*." (Participant 5, Assistant Professor)

Such emotional acknowledgment allowed participants to integrate self-care, reflection, and compassion into their professional identities.

Reaffirming Individuality

Participants described feeling most motivated when their unique intellectual interests were supported, even if unconventional.

> "*My mentor encouraged me to blend creative writing with policy analysis. It felt like I didn't have to cut off parts of myself to succeed*." (Participant 37, PhD Student)

This affirmation promoted resilient striving, intrinsic motivation, and a sustainable work ethic.

Cyclical Movement Between States

Like Goodwin et al.'s (2025) dancers, many participants reported moving between maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism throughout their careers. Transitions often followed specific social interactions, changes in leadership, or personal reflection.

> "*I was totally burned out during my second year, obsessed with being perfect. A friend helped me reframe my thinking. Now I try to do my best without losing sleep over it*." (Participant 15, PhD Student)

Others acknowledged that perfectionistic concerns never fully disappeared but could be managed more constructively.

> "*It's like recovery. You don't unlearn perfectionism overnight. But now I notice when I'm slipping into those old patterns, and I have tools to pull myself back.*" (Participant 10, Assistant Professor)

These narratives affirm the iterative, non-linear nature of perfectionism and highlight the critical role of social context in shaping individual trajectories.

Our findings reveal that social cues in academic settings deeply influence how early-career academics experience perfectionism. Organizational dehumanization, expressed through denial of fallibility, agency, subjectivity, and individuality, triggers maladaptive perfectionism characterized by anxiety, shame, and self-harmful behaviors. In contrast, organizational rehumanization, through affirming feedback, autonomy, empathy, and recognition of uniqueness, fosters adaptive perfectionism rooted in striving, learning, and self-compassion. These perfectionism cycles are not static but dynamic, a

5. Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of research that reconceptualizes perfectionism not as a fixed personality trait but as a dynamic and socially situated experience shaped by workplace environments and interpersonal cues (Goodwin et al., 2025; Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Ocampo et al., 2020). Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with early-career academics, the findings extend the dual-cycle model of maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism, originally developed in the context of professional ballet (Goodwin et al., 2025), to the cognitively intensive, emotionally demanding, and structurally precarious domain of academia.

Crucially, the study identifies organizational dehumanization and rehumanization as central mechanisms through which social environments either activate or alleviate perfectionistic concerns. These findings hold significant theoretical implications by relocating the locus of perfectionism from individual psychopathology to relational and systemic dynamics embedded in academic culture.

5.1. Reaffirming Perfectionism as a Socially Activated Experience

One of the core contributions of this study is the affirmation and extension of the argument advanced by Goodwin et al. (2025): that perfectionism is not solely an internal disposition but is activated and reinforced by social cues, particularly in high-stakes, performance-driven environments. By shifting attention from individual traits to contextual influences, this research challenges the traditional psychological framing that views perfectionism as a stable construct rooted in early developmental experiences (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Cox & Enns, 2003). Instead, consistent with social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), our findings demonstrate how environmental signals, such as performance pressure, peer comparison, and leadership feedback, function as proximal cues that shape how academics assess their self-worth and regulate their striving behaviors.

This reconceptualization is especially salient within the academic context, where evaluative ambiguity and dispersed accountability foster a climate of persistent performance anxiety. Participants' accounts revealed that perfectionism frequently emerged in response to implicit cultural scripts suggesting that ideal academics are tireless, flawless, emotionally detached, and defined solely by their outputs. Even individuals who did not identify as perfectionists prior to entering academia reported internalizing perfectionistic concerns, echoing Goodwin et al.'s (2025) observation that "dehumanizing cues elicited perfectionistic concerns and increased self-destructive behaviors" (p. 1). Therefore, the findings reinforce the view that perfectionism is contextually contingent and socially reinforced.

5.2. Extending the Framework to Cognitive Labor and Identity Work

While Goodwin et al. (2025) situated their model within the physically aesthetic and performative realm of ballet, the present study demonstrates the model's applicability to a markedly different form of labor: cognitive and identity-based work. In contrast to ballet dancers, early-career academics are evaluated not on bodily performance or visual presentation, but on intellectual originality, scholarly productivity, grant competitiveness, and their capacity for sustained, independent thought. Nevertheless, the mechanism of perfectionism activation appears remarkably consistent across domains. What connects these contexts is the convergence of intense performance pressure, limited opportunities, ambiguous evaluative standards, and vulnerability to external judgment.

Moreover, this study introduces an additional theoretical layer by foregrounding the role of identity labor (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) in perfectionist cycles. In academia, professional outputs, such as publications, lectures, and research impact, are not merely occupational achievements but are perceived as extensions of the self. As a result, perfectionistic concerns not only threaten performance but also destabilize personal and intellectual identity. Several participants described experiencing a profound sense of personal failure following a paper rejection or an inability to meet perceived productivity expectations. These findings suggest that perfectionism often reflects unresolved identity tensions, exacerbated by institutional environments that disregard subjectivity, autonomy, and emotional depth.

5.3. Elaborating the Role of Organizational Dehumanization

This study further advances the concept of organizational dehumanization as articulated by Goodwin et al. (2025), by illustrating how its core mechanisms, namely, the denial of fallibility, agency, subjectivity, and individuality, are instantiated in academic settings. Participants recounted how departmental norms, supervisory practices, and institutional logics routinely prioritized output over personhood. Denial of fallibility occurred when mistakes were framed as markers of incompetence rather than learning opportunities, fostering fear of judgment and self-doubt. Denial of agency was evident in hierarchical decision-making structures that subordinated academic autonomy to institutional metrics and funding targets, often rendering early-career academics passive executors of externally imposed agendas. Denial of subjectivity was reflected in environments that stigmatized emotional expression,

overlooked personal hardships, or dismissed mental health struggles, implicitly conveying that professional legitimacy requires emotional invisibility. Denial of individuality manifested through pressures to conform to disciplinary conventions or publishing norms, which often marginalized unconventional research interests and discouraged intellectual risk-taking. Collectively, these dehumanizing dynamics cultivated a context in which maladaptive perfectionism could flourish, driven by shame, anxiety, and the internalized belief that only flawless performance ensures academic legitimacy.

5.4. Rehumanizing Academia: Social Cues and Institutional Change

Encouragingly, the findings also illuminate the potential for rehumanization within academic environments. Participants who encountered affirming social cues, such as empathetic mentorship, collegial support, and emotionally attuned leadership, described experiencing cycles of adaptive perfectionism. These individuals retained high personal standards but approached their work with greater self-compassion, intrinsic motivation, and a willingness to learn from mistakes. This pattern closely parallels the rehumanizing dynamics observed by Goodwin et al. (2025), wherein emotional affirmation, recognition of individuality, and psychological safety enabled healthier forms of striving.

Importantly, these insights underscore the transformative power of micro-level relational practices in reshaping organizational culture. Simple, everyday gestures, such as a mentor sharing a rejection letter, a supervisor validating intellectual curiosity, or a colleague offering support during a personal crisis, can interrupt cycles of maladaptive perfectionism and cultivate climates of care. While broader structural reforms (e.g., redefinition of success metrics, workload redistribution, secure career pathways) are necessary, these interpersonal interactions play a critical role in signaling to individuals that they are valued beyond their academic outputs.

Therefore, fostering adaptive perfectionism in academia requires a dual strategy: systemic institutional change coupled with relational rehumanization. Together, these efforts can create environments where excellence is pursued not through fear and self-erasure but through support, authenticity, and sustainable ambition.

5.5. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several significant theoretical contributions to the literature on workplace perfectionism and organizational behavior. First, it confirms the contextual transferability of the dual-cycle model of perfectionism proposed by Goodwin et al. (2025), extending its applicability beyond aesthetic performance domains to the cognitive labor environment of academia. In doing so, the study validates the role of social cues as central determinants of perfectionistic experience across diverse professional settings.

Second, by integrating insights from identity and emotional labor theories, the study highlights how perfectionism operates not merely as a response to performance demands but also as a strategy for managing academic identity under conditions of chronic evaluation and uncertainty. This perspective advances our understanding of perfectionism as relationally constructed and identity-laden, rather than solely outcome-oriented.

Third, the study refines the theoretical construct of organizational dehumanization by illustrating how its subtle, routinized forms, such as the normalization of emotional suppression, rigid performance metrics, and lack of recognition for individual complexity, mediate the relationship between performance pressure and maladaptive perfectionism.

Finally, it positions organizational rehumanization, defined through relational empathy, affirmation of individuality, and psychological safety, as a socially embedded corrective mechanism. This rehumanization fosters and sustains adaptive perfectionism grounded in growth, resilience, and self-compassion, thereby shifting the focus from self-surveillance to self-development.

5.6. Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer important practical implications for academic institutions, supervisors, and early-career development programs. For institutions, there is a critical need to reassess how success is defined and measured. Current systems that prioritize quantifiable outputs, such as publication counts, grant income, and citation metrics, may inadvertently reinforce maladaptive perfectionism and contribute to psychological distress. Therefore, institutions should consider adopting more holistic and inclusive performance frameworks that balance excellence with sustainability, equity, and well-being.

For academic supervisors and leaders, the study emphasizes the importance of modeling imperfection, encouraging emotional openness, and validating diverse scholarly trajectories. Acts as simple as sharing one's own professional setbacks, offering compassionate feedback, or supporting unconventional research agendas can serve as rehumanizing interventions that foster a healthier academic climate.

Furthermore, early-career support programs should incorporate structured guidance on managing perfectionism, cultivating self-compassion, and developing psychological resilience in the face of academic uncertainty. Workshops, peer mentoring, and reflective writing sessions can equip emerging scholars with tools to navigate the cultural pressures of academia without compromising their mental health or personal identity. By fostering environments that acknowledge the complexity and humanity of scholars, not merely their productivity, universities can support more enduring and fulfilling forms of academic striving.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, as a qualitative investigation, its findings are not generalizable in the statistical sense. Although the sample was diverse in terms of career stage and disciplinary affiliation, future studies could expand to include senior faculty, non-tenure track staff, and academic administrators to capture broader institutional perspectives.

Second, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to capture how individuals move between cycles of perfectionism over time. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insight into the developmental trajectories of perfectionism in academic careers and the durability of rehumanizing interventions.

Third, while the study explored perceived social cues and institutional norms, it did not include the analysis of formal policy documents or ethnographic observation of academic environments. Such methods could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how organizational dehumanization is structurally embedded and operationalized.

Future research should also investigate intersectional dynamics. For example, examining how experiences of perfectionism and dehumanization vary across dimensions such as gender, race, class, and disability would deepen the inclusivity of theoretical models. Additionally, intervention-based studies could evaluate specific practices aimed at enhancing rehumanization and mitigating perfectionist distress, providing actionable strategies for academic institutions seeking meaningful cultural reform.

Perfectionism in academia is not merely an individual psychological issue; it is a relational and cultural phenomenon. This study illustrates that early-career academics are not inherently perfectionists by disposition, they become perfectionists through continuous exposure to social cues that govern the extent to which their humanity is accepted within professional spaces. When humanity is denied, perfectionism becomes maladaptive. When it is affirmed, it becomes a source of personal and professional growth.

7. Conclusion

This study advances a relational and context-sensitive understanding of perfectionism by demonstrating how organizational environments in academia shape early-career scholars' experiences of both maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism. Building on the foundational framework developed by Goodwin et al. (2025), it reinforces the argument that perfectionism is not a fixed psychological trait but a dynamic response to social cues and cultural expectations embedded in institutional settings.

In high-pressure academic environments marked by uncertainty, competition, and constant evaluation, organizational dehumanization, expressed through the denial of fallibility, agency, subjectivity, and individuality, activates maladaptive perfectionism characterized by anxiety, shame, and unsustainable overwork. In contrast, environments that promote rehumanization, through empathetic leadership, affirmation of academic identity, and support for emotional vulnerability, enable adaptive perfectionism defined by resilience, self-compassion, and sustainable striving.

Addressing the growing concern of perfectionism in academia therefore requires more than individual-level coping mechanisms. It demands a broader cultural and institutional transformation. Universities must move beyond reductive performance metrics and cultivate academic environments that honor both intellectual excellence and human complexity. By centering organizational rehumanization as a critical intervention, this study offers a framework for leaders, mentors, and institutions to build healthier academic cultures, where perfectionism becomes not a source of distress, but a pathway to purposeful development.

Future research should continue to explore how these dynamics unfold across disciplines, institutions, and global contexts, and how structural reform and interpersonal practices can interact to reshape the culture of striving in the academy.

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