

The Perfectionist's Dilemma in Sport and Performance Psychology Graduate Trainees

Kaytlyn Johnson, Jesse A. Steinfeldt 

Department of Applied Psychology in Education and Research Methodology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA
Email: kaytjohn@iu.edu

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Abstract

The mental health of students in higher education has garnered increasing attention, yet existing research largely overlooks graduate students, particularly those in Sport and Performance Psychology (SPP). These students navigate multiple demanding roles while managing constant evaluation, hierarchical dynamics, and emotional labor inherent in graduate training. Within this context, perfectionism and burnout emerge as critical concerns. Emotional intelligence (EI) has been found to mitigate the negative impacts of perfectionism and burnout, underscoring its potential as a buffer. Despite evidence supporting EI's protective role in academic and clinical settings, no studies have specifically explored its impact on SPP graduate students. This narrative theoretical review aims to bridge that gap by reviewing the literature on the intersection of EI, perfectionism, and burnout and calling for targeted research to understand better and address the needs of SPP graduate trainees. It also issues a twofold call to action: 1) to encourage more research on the development and impact of perfectionism and burnout in SPP graduate students, and 2) to foster open discussions that mobilize resources aimed at addressing the mental health needs of SPP graduate trainees. Given that perfectionism has been shown to predict burnout, early identification and intervention, potentially through EI enhancement strategies, are essential to mitigate long-term psychological distress and the future of SPP.

Keywords

Graduate Student Mental Health, Burnout, Perfectionism, Graduate Training, Sport Psychology

1. The Perfectionist's Dilemma in Sport and Performance Psychology Graduate Trainees

Mental health concerns among higher education students have recently intensi-

fied. Psychology graduate students, in particular, face unique, often unrecognized challenges: balancing roles such as student, researcher, teacher, supervisee, and therapist [1]. They are regularly evaluated and must accept constructive feedback [2] while navigating complex power dynamics and maintaining self-confidence [3]. In applied fields such as Sport and Performance Psychology (SPP), these issues may be exacerbated by high-performance settings, where perfectionism and burnout are prevalent and often normalized. Emotional intelligence (EI) can help mitigate perfectionism [4] and burnout [5], highlighting the importance of understanding EI as a protective factor.

Perfectionism, defined by setting excessively high standards and harsh self-criticism [6], has been linked to a range of adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and burnout [7] [8]. Burnout, in turn, is a psychological syndrome resulting from chronic stress, marked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment [9]. Research has shown that perfectionism is associated with stress and burnout across various helping professions, including collegiate coaching [10], clinical psychology [11], and social work [12]. EI is defined as one's ability to use information from their emotions to develop adaptive coping mechanisms [13]. Previous literature has revealed that EI mediates the relationship between perfectionism and life satisfaction [14] and influences perfectionists' emotional coping strategies [4]. EI is also negatively associated with academic burnout [15] and positively associated with academic performance [16].

Thus, EI appears to mitigate the negative effects of perfectionism, which often heighten stress and emotional exhaustion, through mechanisms tied to its core components. Specifically, self-awareness enables recognition of perfectionistic thought patterns, while emotional regulation facilitates cognitive reframing and adaptive coping, which weaken the perfectionism-burnout relationship [4]. In high-performance contexts where pressure and unpredictability are constant, EI equips trainees to manage emotional demands without sacrificing well-being. However, no studies have examined the relationship between EI, perfectionism, and burnout among SPP graduate students. Therefore, the specific research aim of this manuscript is to lay the groundwork for understanding the interplay among EI, perfectionism, and burnout among SPP graduate trainees by reviewing relevant literature, outlining research gaps, and proposing directions for targeted future study. To contextualize this exploration, however, it is first necessary to examine the broader landscape of graduate student mental health.

2. Graduate Student Mental Health

Over the past two decades, especially since COVID-19, researchers have explored undergraduate mental health. However, few studies examine graduate students' mental health. Evans *et al.* [17] found that 41% - 46% of graduate students reported depression, nearly six times higher than the general population. Charles *et al.* [18] found 39% of doctoral and 30% of master's students had symptoms indi-

cating clinical depression, which was influenced by financial stress, poor mentorship, and institutional discrimination. Graduate student mental health remains a critical issue for higher education and the future workforce.

Despite growing research interest, the specific mental health experiences of graduate students in specialized fields like applied psychology remain underexplored. National survey data show that Clinical and Counseling Psychology graduate students experience higher rates of physical and mental health symptoms than both the general population and medical students [3]. Furthermore, many psychology doctoral trainees experience burnout at some point during their education [19] [20]. Additionally, PhD students' dissatisfaction is associated with reduced productivity and mental health problems, including worry, anxiety, exhaustion, and stress [21]. Poor mental health among graduate students can lead to decreased productivity, academic performance, and satisfaction, increased risk of dropout, and adverse personal outcomes [22]-[24]. As such, these findings underscore the urgent need to better understand and support graduate students' mental health in SPP programs.

Sport and Performance Psychology (SPP) Graduate Trainees

Broadly, SPP professionals must balance multiple roles across teaching, research, consulting, and other professional engagements. Organizational demands and stressors faced by SPP professionals include heavy workloads, long working hours, complex ethical obligations, demanding travel arrangements, and presentation issues (e.g., media misrepresentation). Due to the profession's complexity, individuals may experience imbalanced workloads associated with the sport's seasonal demands, unsociable work hours, isolation [25] and difficulty disengaging from work [26]. Perceived stress is a positive predictor of burnout in sport psychology professionals [27]. Moreover, perfectionism has been shown to have significant, negative correlations to SPP professionals' psychological well-being [28]. These challenges are not limited to established professionals. Graduate trainees in SPP often face similar pressures while also navigating the added demands of establishing their professional identities as students, researchers, and practitioners [1]. This dual burden highlights the need to understand better how to support the development and well-being of future SPP practitioners.

The SPP field is rapidly expanding, bringing new opportunities and evolving challenges for graduate trainees. The field of SPP has expanded to provide services beyond sport, including other high-performance domains such as the military, corporate environment, performing arts, and medicine [29] [30]. Furthermore, SPP has become prevalent in educational settings through curricula, research laboratories, and academic journals. Nonetheless, ambiguity persists regarding the definition of Sport and Performance Psychology [31], training requirements, and competency boundaries. Ongoing debates between the roles of Counseling and Kinesiology-based training further complicate efforts to establish standardized pathways for certification, licensure, and ethical practice. Additionally, there re-

mains a need to better understand the context-specific demands faced by SPP professionals, despite their overlap with those of other professions [32]. As a result, graduate students in SPP navigating these divergent training routes may encounter unique challenges.

The demands of the profession, often situated in high-performance environments, may increase SPP students' drive for perfection and heighten their risk for burnout. Unlike traditional counseling and clinical psychology training, typically structured within clinical settings, SPP graduate training is deeply embedded in high-stakes contexts. This performance excellence mandate introduces unique stressors, such as constant evaluation by coaches, athletes, and organizations, and the expectation to deliver results in unpredictable, non-traditional settings like locker rooms, training facilities, and travel environments (e.g., hotels). These demands differ markedly from standard clinical training stressors, which typically occur in controlled environments with clearer boundaries. Furthermore, SPP professionals working at elite levels face multifaceted challenges, including managing clinical concerns alongside performance pressures, navigating ethical dilemmas in informal settings, and responding to crises under intense time constraints. Since clinical skills learned in calm, controlled environments (e.g., counseling centers) do not automatically transfer to high-pressure, unpredictable settings, specialized SPP research and training models that account for the unique demands of performance-based work are needed. Given these multifaceted challenges and the evolving landscape of SPP, it is imperative to consider the impact of burnout and perfectionism on SPP graduate trainees.

3. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a multidimensional personality trait characterized by setting excessively high standards and being overly self-critical [6]. Over the past 30 years, research on perfectionism has expanded significantly [7]. Recent data indicate a 32% increase in perfectionism among students in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom from 1989 to 2016 [33]. A complex phenomenon, perfectionism can lead to challenging life circumstances [7]. Given the vast body of research, conceptualizations of perfectionism vary. Some researchers maintain that perfectionistic strivings (PS) can elicit positive outcomes [34], while others argue that PS may also increase risk for psychological maladjustment following failure [35], motivational and psychological deficits [36], and motivational and psychological vulnerability [37]. This dual nature is particularly relevant in demanding training environments, such as graduate school, where students are being trained to work in high-performance settings.

3.1. Theoretical Conceptualizations of Perfectionism

Two foundational models of perfectionism include Frost and colleagues' [6] and Hewitt and Flett's [38] models. Frost and colleagues [6] defined perfectionism across six dimensions: concern over mistakes, doubts about actions, personal

standards, parental criticism, and organization. Hewitt and Flett [38] highlighted both the self and interpersonal aspects of perfectionism across three dimensions: self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), other-oriented perfectionism (OOP), and socially prescribed perfectionism (SPP). Dual-factor models have also categorized perfectionism as healthy or unhealthy [39], adaptive or maladaptive [40], and as perfectionistic strivings versus perfectionistic concerns [34]. As research evolved, cognitive processes became central to understanding perfectionism. The Perfectionism Cognition Theory (PCT) was developed to help explain how cognitive perseveration, specifically in the form of worry and rumination [41], contributes to distress. Perfectionism is associated with multiple forms of cognitive perseveration, such as ruminating about the need to be perfect or on specific mistakes and failures. Cognitive perseveration can occur in response to a range of stressors and may contribute to vulnerability to mental distress and physical illness [42]. Collectively, these models illustrate the complexity of perfectionism and the challenges in capturing its manifestations across contexts.

3.2. Perfectionism in Graduate Students

Perfectionism has become an increasingly prominent topic in higher education, where academic rigor, competitive environments, and high expectations often create fertile ground for perfectionistic tendencies [43]. Studies have consistently linked perfectionistic concerns, cognitions, and self-presentation in graduate students with negative affect and symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, and reduced life satisfaction [44]-[50]. Gaudreau & Benoit [51] describe perfectionism as a psychological burden, driven by the pressure to maintain peak academic performance. SPP graduate students in these achievement-oriented settings may equate self-worth with flawless performance, which can lead to self-criticism and exacerbate perfectionistic tendencies. Perfectionistic strivers often evaluate themselves against rigid, unrealistic standards and base their self-worth on meeting those standards [52]. These individuals are also more likely to experience academic burnout and report stronger intentions to leave graduate programs [51].

Additionally, perfectionists, in particular, have maladaptive interpersonal schemas that contribute to problematic emotional experiences [53], underscoring the potential role of EI. In other words, perfectionistic students are likely to appraise situations negatively, leading to enhanced distress and insufficient coping resources. For example, Minichiello *et al.* [54] found that perfectionism, specifically self-oriented perfectionism and socially-prescribed perfectionism) were correlated with maladaptive emotion regulation techniques (e.g., catastrophizing and self-blame) and decreases in self-liking and self-competence. These dimensions of perfectionism were also associated with poorer emotion regulation and lower self-esteem [54]. Similar studies demonstrated that those higher in perfectionism report greater emotion dysregulation [55] and maladaptive regulatory strategies (e.g., rumination) [4]. Perfectionists who are unable to cope with stress or regulate their emotions effectively may struggle in high-performance domains, such as

graduate school. As such, research suggests that the pressures of graduate education may not only reinforce perfectionistic tendencies but also contribute to a cycle of deregulation.

Perfectionism can sometimes be associated with motivation and goal attainment, but it is also linked to a range of adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and burnout [37]. Furthermore, self-critical perfectionism is associated with depression and burnout in undergraduate students [8] [56]. Given the complex and often detrimental impact of perfectionism on student mental health, researchers have sought to understand better how different types of perfectionism influence student well-being and academic adjustment. For example, Rice and Slaney [57] found that adaptive perfectionists reported significantly higher scores on positive self-esteem and affect, while maladaptive perfectionists reported significantly more problematic adjustment. Similarly, maladaptive perfectionists have been shown to report higher self-criticism scores and less satisfaction than adaptive perfectionists [58]. Given that maladaptive perfectionists engage in more self-critical evaluations, have lower self-esteem, and are more prone to stress, it may be challenging to end the cycle.

Although perfectionism is conceptualized as having both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions, its impact in SPP training warrants closer scrutiny. Adaptive perfectionism, for example, may appear beneficial in a performance-driven field. However, when coupled with the intense workload, evaluative pressures, emotional labor, and competitive culture of graduate training, these strivings can still contribute to stress and emotional exhaustion. Within SPP, strivings can turn maladaptive as practitioners work under intense time constraints and ethical pressures inherent to performance environments. For example, a trainee striving for “perfect” intervention outcomes might see the athlete’s performance as a reflection of their own competence, which may lead to an overinvestment in work, self-criticism, or burnout. The assumption that adaptive perfectionism is inherently protective may overlook how relentless goal pursuit, even without harsh self-criticism, can erode well-being over time. Despite extensive research on perfectionism among undergraduates [43], a notable gap remains in research on graduate students, particularly SPP graduate students. Within this population, perfectionism acts as a “double-edged sword”, simultaneously driving achievement while increasing vulnerability to distress ([51], p. 1). This paradox underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how perfectionism manifests in graduate training contexts.

4. Burnout

Rooted in caregiving and service occupations, burnout is a syndrome defined as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors” ([59], p. 351). The most widely accepted conceptualization of burnout comprises three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal achievement [9] [60]. Emotional exhaustion is characterized by psychological ef-

fort at work and is described as weariness, tiredness, and fatigue. Depersonalization, the interpersonal component of burnout, is defined as a response characterized by detachment, indifference, and negative attitudes and behaviors toward the work being performed. Lastly, reduced personal achievement reflects negative professional self-evaluation and self-doubt, as well as an increased tendency to evaluate outcomes negatively [60]. Beyond its psychological and behavioral dimensions, burnout is shaped by a range of organizational and personal factors that either exacerbate or mitigate its effects. These influences provide a broader context for understanding how burnout develops and persists.

Burnout can have many consequences for workplace outcomes, including health problems and performance deficits. While some evidence suggests that burnout is related to personality or demographic characteristics, workplace factors (e.g., workload, control, value congruence) are the primary drivers of burnout [59]. Individual factors, such as low self-confidence, use of avoidant coping mechanisms, high expectations, and Type A behavior patterns, can also moderate the development of burnout [60]. Taken together, these considerations are especially relevant in graduate education and training programs, where students often face chronic stressors that mirror those found in professional caregiving roles.

Although stress and burnout are not limited to the helping professions, the difficulties these professionals face in their work may increase their susceptibility to both [61]. Psychotherapeutic occupations, such as SPP, are associated with multidimensional psychological distress, including a high degree of emotional strain and constant demands for empathy [62]. Burnout has been recognized as a concern among those working in applied psychology. A systematic review found that the most frequently cited dimension of burnout among applied psychologists was emotional exhaustion. Additionally, workload and work setting were the most common job demands and factors that contributed to burnout among applied psychologists [63]. In another review, Van Hoy and Rzeszutek [64] analyzed the relationship between socio-demographic, interpersonal, and work-related factors and burnout, as well as psychological well-being among psychotherapists. Results demonstrated that burnout and well-being are related to numerous sociodemographic (e.g., age, gender), interpersonal (e.g., coping, personality), and work-related characteristics (e.g., supervision, personal therapy) [64]. Given the prevalence of burnout and potential consequences on client outcomes, there is a clear need for additional research in these helping professions.

Moreover, previous research highlights potential ethical consequences of psychotherapist burnout. Specifically, psychotherapists who experience burnout are no longer able to manage the therapeutic processes, which may be harmful to clients [65] [66]. In addition, Poczwardowski [67] highlighted that SPP professionals have a responsibility to regulate themselves to provide effective services to clients, often employing the very skills they teach their clients [68]. Although professionals face significant risks of burnout, graduate students in SPP and related fields are similarly exposed to emotional strain and high expectations. Thus, exploring

burnout at an earlier stage may offer critical insights into prevention and long-term personal and professional well-being.

Burnout in Psychology Graduate Students

Despite limited research on graduate student mental health, particularly in psychology, burnout is a common experience among doctoral trainees [19] [20]. This is especially concerning given the sensitive interpersonal nature of the clinical work and the concurrent management of multiple roles and responsibilities. The American Psychological Association (APA) and Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) highlight self-care and the mitigation of burnout as both competency and ethical issues [69] [70]. Graduate trainee burnout can reduce compassion for others, potentially interfering with the counseling process [19]. Notably, graduate trainees and licensed clinicians show similar levels of burnout, with personal burnout being the most prevalent [70], underscoring the need for early intervention and support during training. For example, EI plays a crucial role in academic settings, including burnout prevention, academic adjustment, and life satisfaction [5]. Within the unique settings of SPP training (e.g., locker rooms, hotels), greater emotional awareness and regulation are essential. Specifically, trainees must learn how to manage emotions associated with their clients' complex performance and clinical concerns and recognize when they are emotionally depleted. As such, fostering increased EI may help mitigate the negative consequences of stress and burnout in this population.

Furthermore, the stressors encountered in graduate school place students at risk of burnout. Over 70% of graduate students identified stressors that prevent optimal performance, including academic responsibilities, finances, anxiety, and poor work/school-life balance [71]. PhD students often lack time for recreation, leading to loneliness and psychological distress [72]. 3rd and 4th-year clinical and counseling psychology doctoral students reported significantly higher stress and emotional exhaustion than peers in earlier stages, likely due to increased emphasis on clinical work, dissertation, and pre-doctoral internship requirements [73]. For those in SPP, meeting unrealistic expectations and coping with the demands of graduate school may be particularly challenging. As their professional counterparts do, SPP graduate students must navigate dynamic work environments and job demands, which may increase their risk of workaholism [74] and burnout [63].

Moreover, sociopolitical factors, such as cuts to research funding, internships, and loan-repayment programs, further compound stress among psychology graduate students [75]. These financial and structural constraints not only affect students' immediate educational experiences but also shape their long-term career trajectories. Cuts to federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), may affect both clients and practitioners. Additionally, those hoping to pursue a career in

psychology may be encouraged to pursue alternative occupations and educational paths [75]. These pressures intensify feelings of competition and uncertainty while simultaneously contributing to the development of burnout. Perfectionistic tendencies may also be exacerbated as students strive to meet unrealistic standards in an increasingly unstable field. As highlighted, those in SPP work across a variety of domains, including performance-enhancement training, counseling/clinical psychology, and academia, potentially resulting in diminished well-being [74]. Thus, the intersection of perfectionism and burnout emphasizes the urgent need for targeted support in SPP graduate training contexts.

5. A Call for Action

Andersen and colleagues [76] raised a critical concern about the potential harm posed by SPP trainees whose personal issues, such as psychopathology or inadequate training, may compromise the ethical and competent delivery of services. Traits like perfectionism and resistance to acknowledging flaws can lead trainees to continue clinical work despite potential harm to clients [76]. Moreover, individuals with high perfectionism may be at greater risk of developing maladaptive emotional regulation strategies [4], further amplifying ethical concerns. Recent data highlights the broader mental health crisis among graduate students [17] [18] and rising global rates of perfectionism [33]. These trends reinforce the urgency of examining perfectionism in SPP graduate training contexts. SPP trainees not only face the pressures of achieving academic and professional excellence but are also responsible for supporting the well-being and performance of their clients. For individuals with perfectionistic tendencies, this dual responsibility may intensify stress and hinder both personal and professional functioning. Given perfectionism's links to stress and maladaptive coping [12] and its prevalence among SPP professionals [28], it is imperative to investigate how these traits contribute to burnout and other stressors among SPP graduate trainees.

This manuscript concludes by presenting a twofold call to action: 1) to encourage more research on the development and impact of perfectionism and burnout in SPP graduate students, and 2) to foster open discussions that mobilize institutional and professional resources aimed at addressing the mental health needs of SPP graduate trainees. As the field of SPP continues to evolve, so too must our understanding of the challenges faced by its trainees. Perfectionism, while often associated with high achievement, can contribute to increased vulnerability to stress, self-criticism, and emotional exhaustion: key predictors of burnout. The lack of focused research on SPP graduate students, despite evidence from other helping professions, reveals a significant gap. Future research should explore multiple dimensions of perfectionism and burnout among SPP graduate students to address this critical gap. Specifically, narrative inquiry or interviews could help capture SPP trainees' lived experiences and identify potential institutional barriers. Quantitative studies could examine prevalence rates and the relationships between specific perfectionism dimensions and burnout components, while longi-

tudinal designs might track how these constructs evolve throughout training. Finally, cross-cultural and intersectional studies would illuminate how identity factors and training models shape these dynamics, ensuring that solutions are inclusive and evidence-based.

Moreover, there is a clear need for targeted support systems within graduate training programs to address the unique vulnerabilities of this population. For example, program directors and supervisors can help trainees challenge rigid, core beliefs, engage in corrective emotional experiences, and improve present-moment awareness when supporting them with perfectionistic cognitions and emotions. Additionally, SPP training programs can incorporate field-based emotional-regulation exercises (e.g., mindfulness, self-compassion practices) to help trainees manage the stressors inherent to high-performance environments. Reflective practice and supervision can also help SPP trainees explore the emotional, relational, and ethical complexities of SPP work [77]. Lastly, given that perfectionism has been shown to predict burnout over time, early identification and intervention, potentially through EI enhancement strategies, are essential to mitigate long-term psychological distress. Ultimately, fostering environments that prioritize trainee well-being alongside performance is vital for the future of SPP.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, the existing literature suggests that EI may serve as a critical protective factor for graduate trainees, particularly within the demanding landscape of SPP settings. As perfectionism and burnout continue to intensify across graduate training programs, understanding how EI functions in relation to these constructs becomes increasingly important. Yet, despite evidence linking EI to reduced perfectionistic tendencies and lower burnout in other helping professions, no empirical work has examined these relationships among SPP graduate students, who operate in uniquely high-pressure, emotionally complex environments. Addressing this gap is essential for informing SPP training practices that not only support trainee well-being but also promote ethical, sustainable professional development.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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