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## Perceived Parental Pressure and Coping Mechanisms in Undergraduate Students

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# Perceived Parental Pressure and Coping Mechanisms in Undergraduate Students

Ariel Tran

Honours Psychology Thesis

School of Behavioural and Social Sciences

Brescia University College

London, Ontario, Canada

April 2024

Thesis Advisor: Richard Shugar

### Abstract

With the rising pressure and competition to succeed academically, it is common for students to feel pressured to perform at a certain level. When this pressure to perform primarily stems from parental figures, there are inconsistent studies determining the effect of parental pressure, the student's ability to cope with those stressors, and the internalization of those pressure to succeed. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to uncover the relationship between perceived parental pressure, self-oriented perfectionism and coping self-efficacy amongst first year university students. A sample of 70 female students completed a series of self-reported questionnaires that included an abbreviated Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Stöber, 1998), a Self-Oriented Perfectionism subscale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2004), and a Coping Self-Efficacy Scale (Chesney et. al., 2006). A correlation analysis indicated no relationship between Perceived Parental Pressure and Self-Oriented Perfectionism, as well as no relationship between Self-Oriented Perfectionism and Coping Self-Efficacy. However, results indicate a weak correlation between Perceived Parental Pressure and Coping Self-Efficacy. Further demographic research is suggested.

*Keywords:* perceived parental pressure, perfectionism, coping

## **Perceived Parental Pressure and Coping Mechanisms in Undergraduate Students**

As the public would say, university years are ones most critical period in the development of an adolescent's life. Most students who enter university or college for the first time are typically fresh out of high school, have moved to a new city, and are living away from home. With the general understanding that this transitioning period is often demanding, much research has been conducted on the positivity of the experience. One such study found that students find social support during their first year and reported being better equipped to adapt to university (Awang, Kutty, & Ahmad, 2014). That being said, what does research say about students and their relationship to their parents?

According to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, children learn best when they receive help for concepts that are just outside their understanding (Allal & Ducrey, 2000). Understandably, as children progress through their academic careers, they will begin learning more complex theories and concepts while simultaneously learning how to study. Additionally, many studies acknowledge academic success as a result of parental involvement in their children's education (Porumbu & Necşoi, 2013). Despite studies emphasizing the importance of parental involvement, is it still an important factor in the success of adolescents? One possible reason as to why there is little research conducted on the involvement of parents in university students derives from the assumption that students are older and hence independent and understand their responsibilities in achieving success. Although this is true for most, some parental involvement may persist into a student's adult career. Excessive parental involvement, as seen in authoritarian parenting (i.e., parenting characterized by excessive control (Kaynak et. al., 2021)) may be one example.

When discussing a parent's or guardian's role in a child's academic career, they are often seen as guides and advisors toward academic achievements. Often, a parent's efforts are helpful in a child's academic career, but the amount of parental involvement can become dysfunctional. An example of such parental style includes helicopter parenting. Helicopter parents or guardians are known to hover over children and put pressure on a variety of areas, notably school selection and studying (Kaynak et. al., 2021). These parents are success-oriented and are heavily involved in a student's school life and achievements, a concept that embodies parental pressure. Although there are many variations in name and definitions, parental pressure, or parental academic pressure, is generally when children are pressured by their parent(s) or caregivers to perform exceptionally towards imposed, unrealistic academic achievements (Kaynak et. al., 2021). Regardless of the difficulties in naming and defining parental pressure or parental academic pressure, most research findings agree that it negatively affects a student's academic achievements (Kaynak et. al., 2021).

Additionally, perceived parental academic pressures are defined as the judgement and pressure children feel from their parents or guardians (Kaynak et. al., 2021). Once more, there is limited research that has examined the effects of perceived parental academic pressures, and even less on how parental academic pressures are perceived in students attending postsecondary education. From what was found through the theories of parental pressures, it is assumed that those findings would also be appropriate for the perception of parental pressures. If that is true, then it is assumed that students who perceive higher parental academic pressures would perform significantly worse compared to their peers. Furthermore, how is the perception of academic pressures classified?

The common grasp of perfectionism within the public is a personality disorder distinguished by the extreme strive to be flawless and to complete every task faultlessly. However, in research, perfectionism is widely recognized as a personality trait characterized by imposing overly critical self-evaluations and setting high standards for oneself (Frost & Marten, 1990). Individuals who display perfectionistic characteristics show a consistent pattern of motivation driven by the fear of failing and find new tasks as an opportunity to fail rather than to succeed. In earlier research, perfectionism played a notable role in the theory of several forms of psychopathology (Frost & Marten, 1990). Although most early psychopathology theories have been disputed in the present, it is difficult to disregard the influence they hold over present society. A study conducted in 2019 by Curran and Hill discovered a rise in youths who reported setting unrealistic expectations for themselves and others and feeling pressured to be perfect.

One potential reason for this increase in feeling is due to the increase in pressured and controlling parenting in response to societal expectations. Still, no concrete reason as to why there is a rise in perfectionism amongst the youth has been proven. The most likely motivation may lie in the change to controlling and authoritarian parenting, the style most relevant to perfectionism. (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2019). It was hypothesized that the use of control as a result of parents using a domineering approach to pressure the child to meet their standards for success was associated with unhealthy dimensions of perfectionism. Compared to the use of control as a structure and as a tool of organization, it was concluded to be neither beneficial nor harmful to the development of perfectionism. Despite these speculations, there is no sufficient evidence to validate these findings or determine whether parental involvement is linked to maladaptive perfectionism (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2019; Curran & Hill, 2022).

In recent years, research has shown that perfectionism is a multidimensional personality trait that extends beyond a focus on individuality to include a focus on intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics (Flett, Russo, & Hewitt, 1994). These dimensions of perfectionism include self-oriented perfectionism (SOP), other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., holding high standards towards others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (i.e., the belief that others require perfection from the individual). Each dimension of perfectionism is composed of differences allocated in the individual's behaviours and perfectionists' beliefs (Stoeber, 2015). Self-oriented perfectionism consists of the belief that one must be without flaws, set high personal standards, and be overly self-critical if one fail to meet personal expectations. In contrast, other-oriented perfectionism believes and expects others to strive towards perfection and is extremely critical of others who fail to meet their expectations. Socially prescribed perfectionism, however, believes that others expect the individual to be perfect and that others will be critical of them if they do not meet those expectations (Stoeber, 2015).

What is unique about self-oriented perfectionism, compared to the other two dimensions, is the debate over whether it is an adaptive or maladaptive trait. Research has concluded that individuals who measured high in self-oriented perfectionism also scored high in self-control, perhaps as a consequence of the intrinsic motivation and persistence rooted in self-prescribed perfectionism (Flett, Russo, & Hewitt, 1994). Other studies have speculated that self-oriented perfectionism has higher prosocial motivation compared to the other two dimensions, since these individuals are more conscious of their appearance in society and how they fit into their set norms (Stoeber, 2015). However, other findings allude to self-oriented perfectionism being a maladaptive, emotion-oriented coping mechanism for women in part due to the inability to accept failure (Flett, Russo, & Hewitt, 1994).

What is most notable about self-oriented perfectionism is that it is positively associated with positive behavioural coping and can be interpreted as the natural drive to succeed (Besser, Flett, & Hewitt, 2004). Given these seemingly contradictory points, it is unclear if self-oriented perfectionism is an adaptive trait that aids in coping with daily stress. Specifically, could self-oriented perfectionism be a trait adapted to cope with perceived parental pressures concerning the individual's academic achievements?

Nonetheless, self-oriented perfectionism may not be recognized as a form of coping, as coping includes a considerable list of strategies that are more widely recognized. Coping is defined as behaviours or conscious efforts to manage situations that are evaluated as stressful (Folkman et. al., 1986; Chesney et. al., 2006). Coping strategies include emotion-focused coping, which focuses on managing the emotional responses to a stressful situation, and problem-focused coping, which focuses on modifying problematic aspects of the stressful situation. What coping strategy an individual chooses to adapt is determined by the assessment of coping options, also known as secondary appraisal. Here, an individual judges the degree to which the individual can control the result of the situation (Folkman et. al., 1986; Chesney et. al., 2006; Brougham et. al., 2009). Maladaptive coping strategies occur when an individual primarily applies problem-focused coping strategies to uncontrollable stressors or primarily applies emotion-focused coping strategies to controllable stressors (Chesney et. al., 2006). In contrast, adaptive coping strategies refer to the alignment of the controllability of the stressful event with the appropriate coping strategy (i.e., emotion-focused versus problem-focused).

A key coping theory studied in this investigation is the judgment about one's ability to implement specific coping strategies and behaviours, also called coping-self efficacy (CSE)



(Chesney et. al., 2006). Under the construct of self-efficacy, coping self-efficacy is the positive belief in one's ability to deal with difficulties as they arise. In other words, coping self-efficacy is one's capability to cope with stressors (Schwarzer & Renner, 2000). Those who are reported to have high coping self-efficacy are reported to quickly recover from setbacks and maintain goal commitment. In contrast, action self-efficacy focuses on the individual's initiative to prevent coping post-stress. Those who score high in active self-efficacy are reported to anticipate possible outcomes of diverse strategies and responses and are constantly attempting to adopt a new behaviour (Schwarzer & Renner, 2000).

But this leaves the question: how do students who perceive academic pressures cope with the high demands of university? Is the source of the pressure associated with what they believe their parents' expectations are for them? Based on information provided by previous studies, one could associate students who find success despite academic challenges while possessing a greater ability to cope. It could also be assumed that these students who are capable of organizing and managing stressful situations share a common personality trait. This commonality may be the influence of self-oriented perfectionism, as students are internally motivated to be accepted by others.

In addition, as parental pressure is, in some cases, correlated with perfectionism, this study aims to understand the influence and involvement of coping and perfectionism in university students who perceive academic pressure from their parents or guardians. It is predicted that higher scores on the Self-Oriented Perfectionism (SOP) scale, in conjunction with high perceived parental pressures in the last two years, will correlate with a strong  $p$ -value. Whereas lower scores on the SOP subscale, in conjunction with lower perceived parental

academic pressures in the past two years, will correlate with a weaker  $p$ -value. Secondly, higher perceived parental academic pressures (PPAP) will score lower on the Coping Self-Efficacy (CSE) Scale, whereas lower perceived parental pressures are more likely to have higher scores on the CSE scale. That is, there will be a negative correlation between CSE scores and PPAP scores. Finally, higher levels of Self-Oriented Perfectionism are associated with lower scores on the CSE scale, whereas lower levels of SOP are associated with higher scores on the CSE scale. That is, there will be a negative correlation between SOP scores and CSE scores.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

70 female students from Psychology 1015B, Introduction to Psychology, from Brescia University/College were recruited to participate in this study.

### **Materials**

Participants answered three questionnaires. Participants completed an Abbreviated Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (AFMPS) (Frost et. al., 1990) consisting of items relevant to perceived parental expectations (5 items) and criticism (4 items), questions 1, 3, 5, 11, 20, 22, 26, and 35. Students were asked to answer questions such as “My parents set very high standards for me” or “As a child, I was punished for doing things less than perfectly” in relation to how much these statements apply to them. Each statement were answered on a 5-point Likert scale with anchor points at 1(‘Strongly disagree’), 3(‘Neutral’), and 5(‘Strongly agree’) (see Appendix A)

Participants then completed a Self-Oriented Perfectionism (SOP) subscale derived from the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale by Hewitt & Flett (1991, 2004). Questions 1, 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 17, 20, 23, 28, 32, 34, 36, 40, and 42 were measured on a 7-point Likert scale with anchor points at 1('Strongly disagree'), 4('Neural and undecided'), and 7('Strongly agree'). Answers to questions 8, 12, 34, and 36 were reversed before calculating participants' sum of scores see Appendix B)

Participants lastly completed a Coping Self-Efficacy (CSE) Scale answering 26 statements in regard to the statement "When things aren't going well for you, or when you're having problems, how confident or certain are you that you can do the following" (Chesney et. al., 2006). Students were asked answer statements such as "Keep from getting down in the dumps" on a 11-point Likert scale with anchor points at 0('Cannot do at all'), 5('Moderately certain can do'), and 10('Certain can do') (see Appendix C)

## **Procedure**

Students in the designated course were directed to read a call for participants recruiting involvement in this study, on the Brescia SONA research system. All activities were completed online. After reading a Letter of Information (LOI) and Consent form (see Appendix D), students were directed to complete three tasks. First, participants were directed to answer a demographic question regarding gender identification. Participants were then directed to the different questionnaires, the AFMPS, the SOP subscale, and finally the CSE scale. Upon completion of the survey, participants were granted 1 research credit as compensation.

## Results

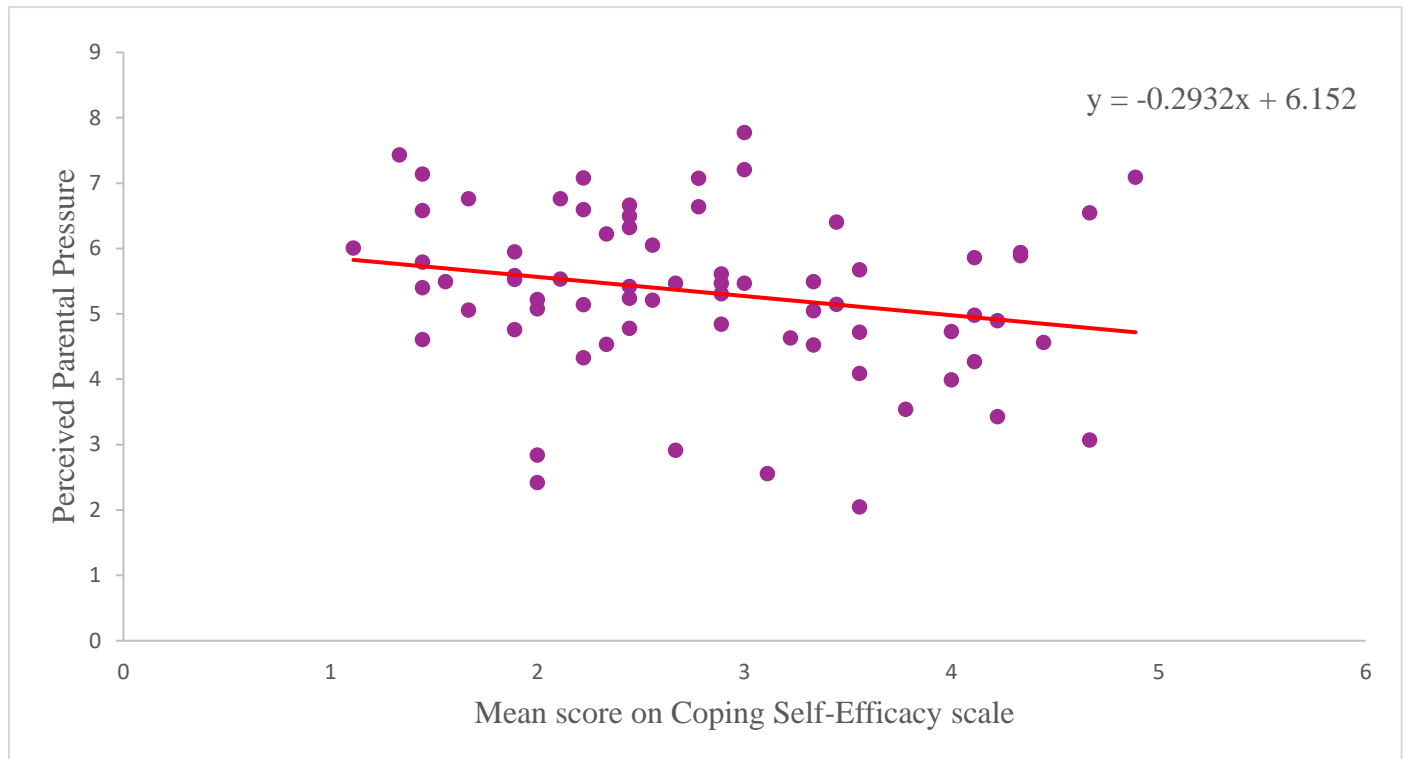
70 participants were included in the data analysis assessing the influence of Self-Oriented Perfectionism (SOP) and Coping Self-Efficacy (CSE) on Perceived Parental Pressure (PPP). Participants' scores on the PPP scale, SOP subscale, and the CSE scale were averaged, and Pearson correlations were calculated to determine if the variables were related to each other. The analysis indicated that PPP and CSE presented a weak, negative correlation,  $r(68) = -.23, p = .023$  (see Figure 1). No other significances between PPP and SOP (see Figure 2) or CSE and SOP were found (see Figure 3).

Furthermore, a multiple regression analysis was performed to determine if there is a combined effect of CSE and SOP on PPP. The results of the multiple regression analysis indicated that CSE predicts PPP slightly better than chance ( $F(1,68) = 4.08, p = .047$ ) (see Table 1). However, including SOP to the model reduces its accuracy and no longer predicts PPP better than expected by chance ( $F(2,67) = 2.02, p > .1$ ) (see

**Table 2).**

**Figure 1**

*Relationship Between PPP and CSE Scores*



*Note.* There is a weak correlation between PPP and CSE scores,  $p < .05$ ,  $n = 70$

**Figure 2**

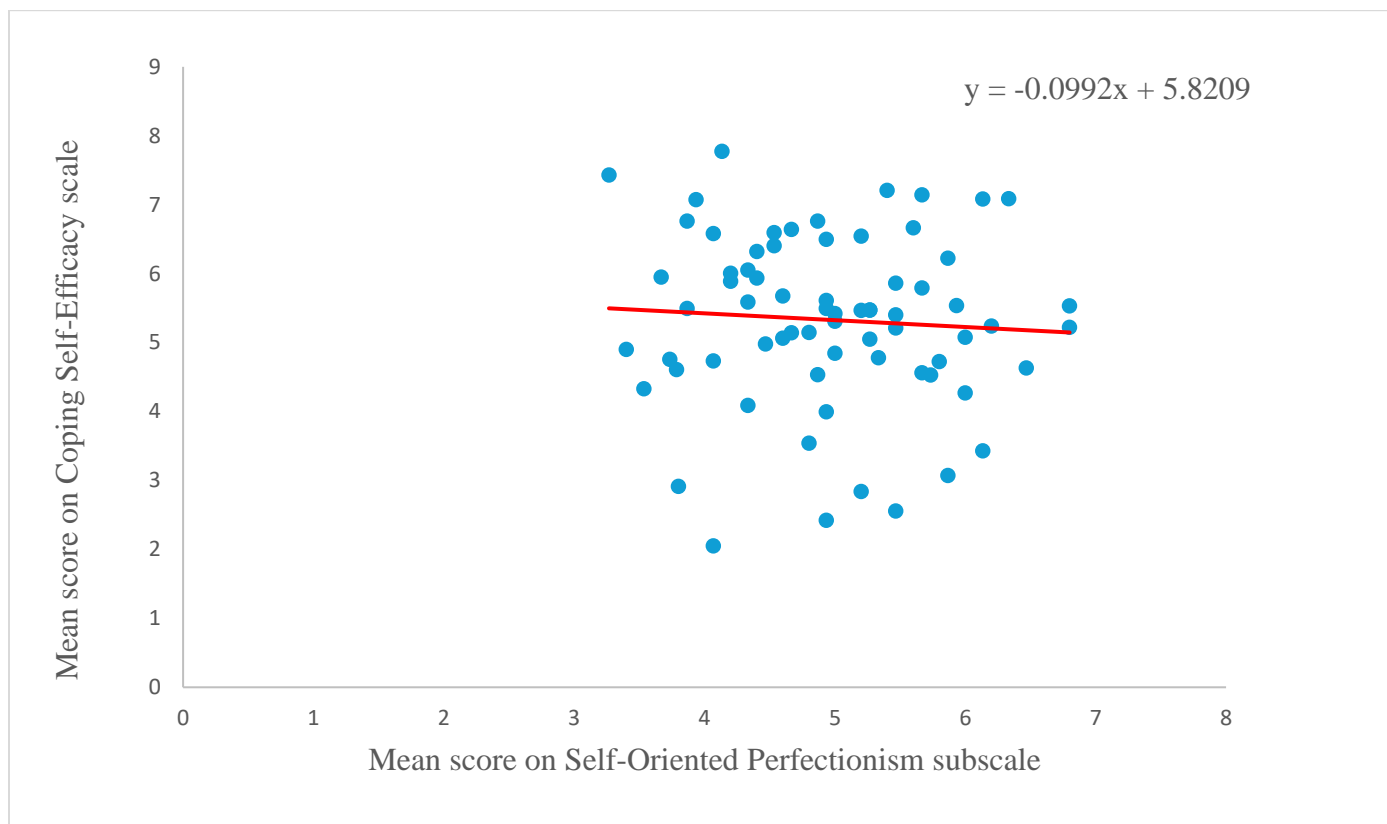
*Relationship Between PPP and SOP Scores*



*Note.* There is no correlation between PPP and SOP scores.

**Figure 3**

*Relationship Between CSE and SOP Scores*



*Note.* There is no correlation between COP and SOP scores.



**Table 1**

*The regression model with both Self-Oriented Perfectionism and Coping Self-Efficacy produces*

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	AIC	Overall Model Test			
					F	df1	df2	p
1	0.239	0.0570	0.0288	208	2.02	2	67	0.140

Model Coefficients - Perceived Parental Pressure

Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		t	p
			Lower	Upper		
Intercept	3.6612	0.9076	1.850	5.473	4.034	< .001
Coping Self Efficacy	-0.1945	0.0975	-0.389	1.77e-4	-1.994	0.050
Self-Oriented Perfectionism subscale	0.0244	0.1433	-0.262	0.310	0.171	0.865

**Table 2**

*The model with only Coping Self-Efficacy produces*

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	AIC	Overall Model Test			
					F	df 1	df 2	p
1	0.238	0.0566	0.0427	206	4.08	1	68	0.047

Model Coefficients - Perceived Parental Pressure

Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		t	p
			Lower	Upper		
Intercept	3.786	0.5310	2.727	4.84599	7.13	<.001
Coping Self Efficacy	-0.195	0.0967	-0.388	-0.00228	-2.02	0.047

## Discussion

The results of the analyses found no significant correlations between PPP and SOP, or between CSE and SOP. However, a weak negative correlation was found between PPP and CSE. It was hypothesized that participants who perceive higher parental pressure would have better coping abilities as well as higher self-oriented perfectionism. However, the results of the study were not consistent with the hypotheses. In contrast, the negative correlation between perceived parental pressure and coping self efficacy indicated the opposite of the hypothesized. This suggests that students who perceive higher parental stress have lower abilities to cope with those stressors.

Although literature research suggest that SOP may be beneficial to an individual's ability to cope with stressors, the results of the study could not confirm nor deny this claim. As mentioned by Flett, Russo, and Hewitt (1994), SOP may have influenced participants' ability to cope with stress as it acted as intrinsic motivation to persist through rough situations. On the contrary, as participants in this study were uniquely female students, a larger, diverse population is required to identify any differences in adaptive or maladaptive components of SOP.

In regard to PPP and CSE, the result for these variables indicates further research is required to understand their relationship. As PPP is understood to negatively affect student's academic achievements (Kaynak et. al., 2021), is it consistent with a decreased belief in their ability to deal with the academic stress (Schwarzer & Renner, 2000). However, as there is very limited research comparing these variables, it is still unclear whether one variable influences the other.

The interpretation of this study should take into consideration the limitations inherent by its design. First, as the study focused on first year Undergraduate students. The majority of participants have self-reported having neither extreme parental pressure or perfectionism tendencies, nor reported possessing inferior or exceptional coping mechanisms. It is assumed that as a first-year students, the participants have had years of experience in coping with the stress imposed by parental pressure to successfully perform academically. It can be expected that as students have experienced high stress events, for example applying to university or studying for exams, they are equipped with subjectively effective coping mechanisms. Furthermore, as the survey ran after the first semester, participants may have learned other effective ways of coping through experience and have access to sophisticated coping resources available at Brescia for students, i.e. Wellness Peer Program, Wellness Peer Spaces, and academic counseling, that may not have been available in their high school. Moreover, as the survey was targeted a very niche population, the results may not be transferable for other populations.

Additionally, four participants were excluded from this study. Since this study looked at the response of a specifically female group, one participant was excluded from the study as they identified as male. One participant was excluded due to an incomplete survey. Finally, two participants were excluded as they recorded an unrealistic completion of a 50-question survey in under 2 minutes. Furthermore, to compensate for 9 missing data points from 8 other participants, the values were estimated by averaging the result of the corresponding questionnaire for the matching participant.

It is suggested that future research survey a larger, more inclusive population. As stated, one limitation of this study reflects on the normality of a very specific population. Although these findings may show efficacy, it does not necessarily prove effectiveness of the results. As

the general population consist of generations with different life experiences and coping abilities, perhaps another group of individuals will have a more distinct relationship with parental pressure and their perceived ability to cope with those stressors.

Another suggestion for future research regards the coding of the survey. Incorporating a system that compiles participants to answer all questions before continuing to the next set of questions. This will prevent excluding any participants due to incomplete surveys. Additionally, it is recommended that a more detailed demographic may be analyzed. As the current study only inquired the gender of the participants, it fails to consider other extraneous variables that may contribute to the consistency of the results. Variables such as the participant's living situation may influence the proximity and intensity of perceived parental pressure as the participant is more exposed to the pressure in comparison to participants who live on campus. With this added demographic variable, it also rises the question if the proximity to peer support may influence a participant's coping strategies, a concern that has not been addressed by this study.

In conclusion, this study concluded that there is little to no evidence that one's ability to cope with stress and self-oriented perfectionism tendencies has an effect on perceived parental pressures. Although the results of this study indicated a potential relationship between perceived parental pressures and coping self-efficacy, the results may also be helpful to guide future research.

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## Appendix D

### Letter of Information



### Letter of Information and Consent

<b>Project Title</b>	Perceived parental pressure and coping mechanisms in undergraduate students
<b>Document Title</b>	Letter of Information and Consent
<b>Principal Investigator</b>	Richard Shugar, MSc, School of Behavioural and Social Sciences, 519-432-8353, rshugar@uwo.ca
<b>Thesis Researcher</b>	Ariel Tran, School of Behavioural and Social Sciences, atran264@uwo.ca

#### 1. Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in this research study about perceived parental pressure and coping mechanisms at Brescia University College.

This study will not be conducted by your professor and has no bearing on your mark in Psychology 1015B.

You do not have to participate in this study as part of this course.

#### 2. Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of parental pressures on students and how they manage those pressures. This study is important as it could provide a better understanding of the parent's role in a parent-child relationship and the strain it can have on the child.

### **3. How long will you be in this study?**

It is expected that this study will take approximately 15-20minutes to complete.

### **4. What are the study procedures?**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a few self-reflective questionnaires regarding your opinion of yourself and others, as well as your ability to manage stress.

### **5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

### **6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?**

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study, but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole which includes increasing knowledge of how one copes under perceived parental pressures.

### **7. Can participants choose to leave the study?**

You can withdraw even after you have given consent, without penalty, by contacting the Principal Investigator and Thesis Researcher. If you wish to withdraw and have your information removed, please let the Principal Investigator Richard Shugar, MSc, [rshugar@uwo.ca](mailto:rshugar@uwo.ca), and Thesis Researcher Ariel Tran, [atran264@uwo.ca](mailto:atran264@uwo.ca), know by March 31, 2024, after which the Qualtrics survey will be submitted and it will no longer be possible to leave the study.

### **8. How will participants' information be kept confidential?**

While we do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project which we may be required to report by law, we have a duty to report. The Principal Investigator will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location for a minimum of 7 years. Participant's data may be retained indefinitely and could be used for future research purposes (e.g., to answer a new research question). By consenting to participate in this study, you are agreeing that your data can be used beyond the purpose of this present study by either the current or other researchers..

Your name will not be used in any dissemination or publication of the study results.

Representatives of Brescia University College's Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

### **9. Are participants compensated to be in this study?**

You will be compensated for your participation in this study. You will earn 1 research credit in your Psychology 1015B course for participating.

### **10. What are the rights of participants?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study by letting the Principal Investigator and Thesis Researcher know by March 31, 2024. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study, it will have no effect on your mark or academic standing in any course.

You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form.

### **11. Whom do participants contact for questions?**

If you have questions about this research study please contact Richard Shugar, [rshugar@uwo.ca](mailto:rshugar@uwo.ca), 519-432-8353. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact the Research Officer at Brescia, Dr. Aaron Cecala, [acecala@uwo.ca](mailto:acecala@uwo.ca). The Research Officer is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

### **12. Consent**

Upon reading the LOI and Consent form, you indicate your voluntary agreement to participate by responding to the questionnaire.