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Empirical Research

Committed action: An initial study on its association to procrastination in academic settings

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ABSTRACT

Despite the relevance of the notion of committed action in the study of procrastination, this construct and theoretical approach has been largely absent in past research. The aim of this study was to investigate whether the variable of committed action from the Psychological Flexibility (PF) model drawn from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy would add incremental variance in the prediction of self-reported procrastination over and above the variables of: psychological distress, acceptance, cognitive fusion, and attention to the present-moment. The sample was comprised of 323 (82.7% female) French-Canadian university students. Results from a three-stage hierarchical multiple regression revealed that committed action added unique and significant variance in the prediction of self-reported procrastination. Moreover, committed action was the strongest predictor in our model contributing more to the prediction of procrastination than psychological distress, acceptance, cognitive fusion, and attention to the present-moment. The unique contribution of committed action brings additional evidence on the applicability of the PF model in the study of procrastination among university students and illustrates the importance of taking into account the behavioral processes from the engaged axis of the PF model in the study of procrastination among university students.

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1. Introduction

Procrastination is defined as the voluntary delay of an intended course of action despite expecting negative consequences because of the delay (e.g., Klingsieck (2013), Sirois and Pynchyl (2013) and Steel (2007)). Researchers estimate the prevalence of students engaging in such dilatory behaviors to vary from 70% (Schouwenburg, Lay, Pynchyl, & Ferrari, 2004) to 95% (Ellis & Knaus, 2002). Moreover, other studies have found that 46% of students report procrastinating almost always to always when it comes to writing a term paper, and for 20–30% of students, procrastination has become a serious problem that affects academic success and quality of life (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984).

Past research has found that procrastination is associated with negative emotions such as stress (Blunt & Pynchyl, 2000), lower self-esteem (Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988), lower self-confidence (Ferrari, 1991), and lower self-efficacy (Ferrari, Parker, & Ware, 1992; Tuckman & Sexton, 1992). Procrastination is also known to lead to course withdrawal (Wesley, 1994), increases the risk of health problems (Sirois, 2007; Sirois, Melia-Gordon, &

Pynchyl, 2003; Tice & Baumeister, 1997), causes interpersonal conflicts (Day, Mensink, & O'Sullivan, 2000), and reduces academic performance (Beswick et al., 1988; Kim & Seo, 2015; Klassen, Krawchuk, & Rajani, 2008; van Eerde, 2003). These results make it clear that procrastination can be an impediment to academic success, a major problem for college and university students, and highlight the need to focus on variables that could be used in clinical (e.g., Pynchyl and Flett (2012)) and academic settings (Schouwenburg et al., 2004) to make more effective interventions based on a refined understanding of procrastination.

There is growing interest in the application of the Psychological Flexibility (PF) model of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT – Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson (2012)) with college and university students and in counseling centers (see Pistorello (2013), for a complete book on the subject). ACT stems from a philosophy of functional contextualism (Hayes, 1993) and is rooted in a modern behavior analytic theory of human language called Relational Frame Theory (RFT – Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). The PF model integrates six interrelated processes that are conceptualized on a continuum from flexible to inflexible; these are: (1) acceptance vs experiential avoidance, (2) cognitive defusion vs cognitive fusion, (3) self-as-context vs conceptualized-self, (4) flexible present-focused attention vs past or future thoughts, (5) clear values vs unclear values, and (6) committed action vs

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inaction/impulsivity. For research and applied purposes, it is useful to pair these processes in three response styles: “open” (composed of acceptance and defusion), “centered” (self-as-context and flexible present-moment awareness) and “engaged” (values, committed action; Hayes et al. (2012)).

Based on the PF model, Scent and Boes (2014) described procrastination in terms of cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance with difficult thoughts or emotions related to academic tasks. Cognitive fusion happens when private events (e.g., thoughts) exert strong influence on an individual’s subsequent responding, narrowing his or her available repertoire of actions (i.e., psychological inflexibility). For example, when given an assignment, a student may have the thoughts such as: “I don’t think I will be able to do the task I was asked to do,” or “I am not in a mood to study.” The discomfort created by the fusion with these thoughts is avoided by engaging in non-work-related tasks (such as watching television, or surfing on the Internet). While effective in providing short-term mood repair (Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000; Sirois & Pychyl, 2013), this avoidant behavior moves the student away from his or her values and personal goals (e.g., learning, achieving, obtain a diploma). In sum, from a PF model perspective, academic procrastination is understood in terms of the fusion with private events and the use of experiential avoidance as a short-term mood regulation strategy that often results in detrimental and negatives outcomes for the student in the long term (e.g., less time is left for writing a paper leaving the student to experience more stress and/or poorer overall performance).

Studies that have investigated the relation between procrastination and the PF model found that procrastination was negatively and moderately related to lower levels of acceptance, adding support to the negative link between PF and procrastination (Glick, Millstein, & Orsillo, 2014). Glick and colleagues found that the combined effects of acceptance, mindfulness (a concept close to “flexible attention to the present-moment” in the PF model), and values added to the prediction of academic procrastination over trait anxiety. Similarly, results from correlational studies, based on three different measures of mindfulness, showed that lower levels of mindfulness were associated with higher levels of self-reported procrastination. In addition, mindfulness was found to mediate the relation between procrastination and perceived stress (Sirois & Tosti, 2012). Together, these results show compelling evidence regarding the support of attentional control variables such as mindfulness in the reduction of the negative effects of dysfunctional procrastination (Pychyl et al., 2012).

More recently, ACT has been tested in a randomized controlled trial with interesting results. In their 8-week intervention study of undergraduates suffering from academic procrastination, Wang et al. (2015) compared an ACT-based intervention ($n=20$) to a CBT intervention ($n=19$) and a control group ($n=20$). The authors found that both interventions had remarkable short-term significant effects in decreasing procrastination, and in regard to the follow-up effect, ACT had a better long-term effect.

Finally, Glick and Orsillo (2015) compared two 20 min web-based interventions for procrastination: Acceptance-Based Behavioral Therapy (ABBT; $n=49$) and a Time Management (TM; $n=69$) intervention. Although the authors found no significant differences between the two interventions with regard to behavioral procrastination there was moderated effect with the results revealing that the ABBT intervention was more effective for students with high academic values, further supporting the centrality of values in overcoming procrastinatory behaviors.

Most of the studies relating PF to procrastination have focused primarily on the open (acceptance, defusion) and centered (attention to the present-moment) axis of the PF model, neglecting other important core processes related to the engaged axis and overt behaviors, notably committed action. Committed action

refers to flexible persistence in actions that are linked to chosen values and goals even in the occurrence of psychological obstacles, such as difficult feelings, thoughts and urges (Hayes et al., 2012). Within the PF model, committed action is seen as the opposite of impulsive behaviors and inaction (Hayes et al., 2012). Given that procrastination is closely associated with impulsive behaviors (e.g., Steel (2007)), avoidant coping strategies (Blunt & Pychyl, 2000; Sirois & Kitner, 2015) and inability to reach personal goals (Gustavson, Miyake, Hewitt, & Friedman, 2014), committed action is expected to be negatively related to procrastination. However, the process of committed action has never been studied in relation to procrastination, and there is no empirical evidence that committed action can add to the explanation of procrastination among university students over and above mindfulness, acceptance or cognitive fusion.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the applicability of committed action in the prediction of self-reported procrastination. We hypothesized that: (1) committed action, as well as measures of the PF model (acceptance, attention to the present-moment) would have moderate negative correlations with procrastination, whereas measures of psychological inflexibility (cognitive fusion) would have moderate positive correlations with procrastination; and (2) committed action would make a unique contribution over and above variables of psychological distress and variables of the PF model in the prediction of self-reported procrastination.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants in the initial sample were 392 university students (82.6% female) between the age of 18 and 63 years ($M=25.12$, $SD=6.36$), from a total of sixteen universities in Quebec, Canada, of whom 67.3% were studying at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (UQTR). More than half of the participants (63.6%) were undergraduate students, and 87% were studying full-time. No data concerning ethnicity were collected.

Participants were recruited via universities’ mailing list and social media (e.g., Facebook). Participants completed an online version of the questionnaires on a secure website. Before accessing the questionnaires, they were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and signed an informed consent. Participants were entered in a draw for a chance to win one of six MASTERCARD® gift certificates worth 25\$. All information was kept confidential and anonymous. There were two eligibility criteria: (a) being at least 18 years of age, and (b) studying in a Canadian university. The Research Ethics and Integrity Committee of UQTR approved this study. Below are the measures that were administered to assess procrastination, general psychological distress, acceptance, cognitive fusion, attention to the present-moment, and committed action.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Pure Procrastination Scale

Procrastination was assessed using the French version of the Pure Procrastination Scale (PPS; Rebetez, Rochat, Gay and Van der Linden (2014), original version by Steel (2010)). The 11-item questionnaire evaluates procrastination conceptualized as a dysfunctional delay. Sample items are: “I am continually saying I’ll do it tomorrow” and “I delay making decisions until it’s too late.” Participants answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *very seldom or not true of me*, to 5 = *very often true of me*). Responses were summed to create a score of general procrastination. Reliability for

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