



Do adaptive perfectionism and self-determined motivation reduce academic procrastination?



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ABSTRACT

College students vary in their procrastinating behavior with some completing their work promptly and others constantly delaying/failing to meet deadlines. We investigated students' striving for perfectionism and self-determined motivation as predictors of their academic procrastination. Undergraduates (393) completed a survey including a 35-item Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, a 28-item Academic Motivation Scale, and a 35-item Procrastination Assessment Scale. Using hierarchical regression analyses we found that different facets of perfectionism significantly predicted various types of procrastination (exam preparation, writing papers, and completing reading assignments), and self-determined motivation explained incremental, unique variance. Specifically, students who doubted their ability to succeed, viewed mistakes as a sign of failure, and did not set high personal standards, were more likely to report that their procrastinating behavior was problematic. Further, students who were more organized and self-determined in their motivation were less likely to procrastinate. Finally, mediation analyses portrayed students with stronger self-determined motivation as less likely to procrastinate and more likely to achieve higher GPAs because of high personal standards. Our findings suggest that educators who can help college students become more organized, pursue higher personal standards of achievement, and become more self-determined in their motivation could potentially reduce procrastination and facilitate higher academic performance.

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1. Introduction

Despite accompanying discomfort and anxiety, over 50% of all college students procrastinate and delay or fail to complete their academic tasks (Klingsieck, 2013; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). It appears that students are not completely aware of the severity of their own procrastination habits, as faculty members find that students procrastinate more than what they self-report (Senecal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995). Educators agree that it is crucial to reduce academic procrastination as it results in several poor outcomes including missed deadlines, withdrawing from courses, and low course grades (Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988; Rothblum, Solomon, & Murakami, 1986; Semb, Glick, & Spencer, 1979). Various explanations have been offered towards understanding the root causes of procrastination and these include problematic personality traits, motivational deficits, clinical issues, and situational factors (Klingsieck, 2013). Specifically, some researchers have linked procrastination to perfectionism or striving for the unachievable (Hewitt & Flett, 2007), and others have examined it in relation to students' varied motivations in pursuing a college education (Wolters, 2003). Is it possible that adaptive perfectionism and self-determined motivation can provide a buffer against academic procrastination? Given the call for a thorough investigation of these

relationships, we examined answers to this question by investigating the link between various facets of perfectionism (concern over mistakes, personal standards, parent expectations, parental criticism, doubting of actions, and need for organization) and self-determined motivation (intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation) in predicting academic procrastination and academic performance (Steel, 2007).

2. Prior research

2.1. Adaptive/maladaptive perfectionism and procrastination

Perfectionism is defined as the pursuit of extremely high performance expectations, which are often referred to as high personal standards (Slaney, Rice, & Ashby, 2002). Perfectionism is a complex and multifaceted personality trait that includes an excessive concern over mistakes, self-doubt about abilities and actions, overly critical and high parental expectations, rigorous personal standards for self-evaluation, and a desire for orderliness (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblat, 1990). Perfectionism has been carefully scrutinized as a predictor of procrastinating behavior and its nuanced role has been recognized by a recent distinction between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004).

Adaptive, "healthy" perfectionists are described as striving towards achievement and experiencing pride in accomplishments. Adaptive perfectionism has also been defined as including very high-performance

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expectations with low levels of negative self-evaluation (Rice & Ashby, 2007). Maladaptive, “unhealthy” perfectionists are described as displaying evaluative concerns such as worrying about making mistakes, having self-doubt, internalizing others’ high expectations for oneself, and experiencing guilt and shame (Fedewa, Burns, & Gomez, 2005). Maladaptive perfectionism has been defined as having high-performance expectations with extreme self-blame when failing to meet standards (Rice & Ashby, 2007). Maladaptive perfectionists report lower estimated GPA due to low self-esteem and being concerned about negative evaluations (Blankstein, Dunkley, & Wilson, 2008). In addition, negative perfectionists seem to suppress emotions as a way of coping, show excessive concern about failing, an obsessive desire for others’ approval, and report feeling depressed following poorer performance (Bergman, Nyland, & Burns, 2007). Thus, simply setting high standards and pursuing them can be adaptive; however, setting high standards and making self-worth contingent on achieving those high standards is what appears to lead to more pathology (DiBartolo, Frost, Chang, LaSota, & Grills, 2004).

The distinction drawn between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism appears to have some conceptual overlap with the mastery and performance goal orientation that is displayed in situations demanding achievement behaviors. A mastery goal orientation is typically associated with a sustained level or quality of performance whereas a performance goal orientation fosters a failure-avoiding pattern of motivation (Ames, 1992). Further, with mastery goals, pride and satisfaction are associated with successful effort (Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1987) and guilt is associated with inadequate effort (Wentzel, 1989). With performance goals, there is an avoidance of challenging tasks, negative affect following failure, which is accompanied by a judgment of a lack of one’s abilities, and positive affect following success with little effort (Ames, 1992). Thus, a mastery goal orientation appears to show some conceptual overlap with adaptive perfectionism and a performance goal orientation with maladaptive perfectionism.

Similar to the distinction drawn between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism, some researchers distinguish between the self-oriented and socially-oriented facets of perfectionism (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Socially oriented perfectionists believe that others expect them to be perfect and report more procrastination relative to self-oriented perfectionists who are inclined to set high standards for themselves (Flett, Blankstein, Hewitt, & Koledin, 1992). Adaptive perfectionists are less likely to procrastinate because they are achievement oriented, confident, diligently pursue the goals they set for themselves (Seo, 2008), make effective use of cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies (Mills & Blankstein, 2000), have stronger time management skills (Klibert, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Saito, 2005), and higher self-efficacy (Locicero & Ashby, 2000). Such adaptive behavior in self-oriented perfectionists is also associated with the facet of conscientiousness that includes achievement striving, feeling satisfied with good performance, and adjusting expectations in the face of failure (Hewitt & Flett, 2007), and with agentic qualities that include a strong desire to perform, exert self-control, and receive acknowledgment for high achievement (Mackinnon, Sherry, & Pratt, 2013). Thus, adaptive aspects of perfectionism overlap with self-oriented perfectionism as well as mastery goal orientation and are linked with the productive behaviors that buffer individuals from procrastination.

2.2. Self-determined motivation and procrastination

Traditionally, researchers have described procrastination as a coping mechanism with underlying motivations that make it adaptive (i.e., seeking a peak experience, pleasure in rushing to meet a deadline, cognitively efficient) or maladaptive in nature (i.e., fearing failure, negative information about personal performance or self-worth) (Ferrari, 2001; Schraw, Wadkins, & Olafson, 2007). However, drawing on a large-scale meta-analysis of 691 correlations, Steel (2007) concluded that procrastination is more of a motivational problem as it is basically a failure of self-regulation. Procrastinators seem to lack goal-orientation

and self-regulation (Wolters, 2003) and self-regulation also explains unique variance in procrastination beyond what is explained by anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Senecal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995).

Self-regulated behavior is explained by Deci and Ryan’s (2000, 2002) theory of autonomous or self-determined motivation as a continuum with intrinsic motivation and amotivation at both ends, and extrinsic motivation in the middle. Individuals who are more self-determined engage in an activity with a sense of choice or out of free will, whereas individuals who are less self-determined engage in an activity to achieve a desired outcome or consequence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Factors that enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness are likely to enhance self-determined motivation (Grouzet, Vallerand, Thill, & Provencher, 2004) and acting under pressure or feeling obligated to act is likely to increase feelings of being incompetent, helpless, withdrawn, and apathetic. Researchers have operationalized self-determined motivation using the Academic Motivations Scale (AMS; Vallerand et al., 1992) which consists of three subscales (intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation) and note that students with stronger intrinsic motivation and self-regulation report lower procrastination, deeper engagement, and higher persistence at learning activities (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). In contrast, students who lack motivation also report higher levels of procrastination, have a weaker sense of control over their learning process, and do not experience a state of flow or intrinsic engagement (Lee, 2005). High procrastinators also report a lack of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, an external locus of control, and tend to make more external attributions for their success (Brownlow & Reasinger, 2000).

Being able to self-regulate motivation appears to be an important quality in managing procrastination as self-regulated learners show stronger self-efficacy, know how to study, have the meta-cognitive skills to supervise, manage, and direct resources to increase learning (Klassen, Krawchuk, & Rajani, 2008). Competence appears to be a central factor as less competent rather than highly competent students seem to procrastinate from a fear of failure and a breakdown in self-regulation (Hagbin, McCaffrey, & Pychyl, 2012). However, it is the higher level of self-determined motivation that mediates the relationship between self-efficacy and procrastination, suggesting that self-confident students are less likely to procrastinate because they feel more autonomous and in control of their motivation (Katz, Eilot, & Nevo, 2013). Overall, it appears that it is important for students to experience strong self-determined motivation and confidence so as to fend off tendencies to procrastinate.

2.3. Current study: adaptive perfectionism, self-determined motivation, and procrastination

The purpose of this study was to investigate the intricate link between facets of perfectionism and self-determined motivation in explaining academic procrastination. Prior research suggests that individuals displaying attributes of adaptive perfectionism that are similar to the Big Five personality trait of conscientiousness (Hewitt & Flett, 2007), such as higher personal standards, achievement striving, goal pursuit, and pride in accomplishments (Klibert et al., 2005; Locicero & Ashby, 2000; Mills & Blankstein, 2000; Rice & Ashby, 2007; Seo, 2008), are less likely to procrastinate. Further, prior research also indicates that individuals with stronger self-determined motivation show a greater sense of engagement, control, competence, and an ability to self-regulate more effectively, and are less likely to procrastinate (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006; Wolters, 2003). Thus, we tested the following hypotheses:

1. Students who score higher on the adaptive facets of perfectionism (organization and personal standards) will be less likely to procrastinate.
2. Students who score higher on self-determined motivation will be less likely to procrastinate.

Although previous research indicates that adaptive perfectionism (a personality attribute) and self-determined motivation (a motivational

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