Academic Procrastinators and Perfectionistic Tendencies Among Graduate Students

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Research has documented that most college students delay on academic tasks. Surprisingly, graduate students may procrastinate on academic tasks even more than do undergraduate students. Perfectionism also has been found to be high among graduate students. It is likely that for graduate students, delaying academic tasks such as writing a term paper is indicative of perfectionism. Thus, this study investigated the relationship between academic procrastination and perfectionism among 135 graduate students, who were administered the Procrastination Assessment Scale-Students and the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. A canonical correlation analysis revealed that fear of failure, a component of academic procrastination was related to self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism. Other-oriented perfectionism, the third dimension of perfectionism, acted as a suppressor variable. Implications are discussed.

It has been estimated that the overwhelming majority of college students delay on academic tasks to the point of experiencing anxiety (Ellis & Knaus, 1977). Unfortunately, this behavior, which has been termed academic procrastination, is prevalent among both undergraduate (e.g., Solomon & Rothblum, 1984) and graduate (Onwuegbuzie, 1999) students. With respect to the latter, Onwuegbuzie (1999) found that 41.7% of the graduate students reported that they nearly always or always procrastinate on writing a term paper, 39.3% procrastinate on studying for examinations, and 60.0% procrastinate on keeping up with weekly reading assignments.

Surprisingly, graduate students may have an even greater tendency to procrastinate on academic tasks than do undergraduate students. Indeed, Onwuegbuzie (1999) found that graduate students in his study were nearly 3.5 times more likely to report that they nearly always or always procrastinate on keeping up with weekly reading assignments

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and nearly 2.5 times more likely to report that procrastination was nearly always or always a problem when studying for examinations than were a comparison group of undergraduate students in Solomon and Rothblum's (1984) study. Unfortunately, academic procrastination has been found to be associated with negative academic outcomes, including missing deadlines for submitting assignments, delaying the taking of self-paced quizzes, low course grades, and course withdrawal (Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988).

Another trait which has been found to be prevalent among graduate students is perfectionism. Perfectionism has been defined as the tendency to set and to pursue unrealistically high goals and standards for oneself across many domains (Hewitt & Flett, 1991a, 1991b). Recent research suggests that perfectionism is a multidimensional construct comprising three dimensions: self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and socially-prescribed perfectionism. According to Hewitt and Flett (1991a), self-oriented perfectionists tend to set and to pursue rigid and unrealistically high standards for themselves, and to undertake stringent self-appraisal in an attempt to attain perfectionism and to avoid failure. Other-oriented perfectionists hold unrealistic standards for significant others, place importance on other individuals being perfect, and evaluate others' behavior accordingly. Socially prescribed perfectionists believe that significant others (e.g., friends, family, professors, classmates) hold unrealistic standards for them, rigorously evaluate them, and pressure them to be perfect. Research indicates that perfectionists are susceptible to negative affective states such as anxiety (Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Daley, in press).

It is likely that, for graduate students, delaying academic tasks such as writing a term paper is indicative of perfectionism. Indeed, Ferrari (1992) and Saddler and Sacks (1993) found a statistically significant relationship between academic procrastination and perfectionism. Additionally, Onwuegbuzie (1997), in a qualitative study of graduate students enrolled in research methodology courses, found that perfectionistic behavior is associated with procrastinating over undertaking research proposals. This author recommended that more research is needed which investigates the relationship between academic procrastination and perfectionism. Indeed, limited research has been conducted in this area (Saddler & Sacks, 1993). This was the purpose of the present study.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 135 graduate students enrolled in several sections of a graduate-level research methodology course at a small southeastern

university. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 51 (mean = 26.0, SD = 6.8). The majority of participants was female (92.6%).

Instruments and Procedure

Participants were administered the Procrastination Assessment Scale-Students (PASS) and the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS). The PASS, which was developed by Solomon and Rothblum (1984), contains two parts. The first part lists six academic tasks involving writing a term paper, studying for examinations, keeping up with weekly reading assignments, performing administrative tasks, attending meetings, and performing academic tasks in general. Respondents are asked to complete three rating scales for each of the six tasks indicating the frequency with which they procrastinate on that task (1 = *Never procrastinate;* 5 = *Always procrastinate*), whether their procrastination on the task is a problem (1 = *Not at all a problem;* 5 = *Always a problem*), and whether they want to decrease their procrastination on the task (1 = *Do not want to decrease;* 5 = *Definitely want to decrease*). As recommended by its authors (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), the PASS items pertaining to (a) the frequency with which respondents procrastinate on a task and (b) whether their procrastination on that task is a problem were summed to provide an overall measure of academic procrastination, with total scores ranging from 12 to 60. Higher scores are indicative of self-reported academic procrastination.

The second section of the PASS asks students to think of the last time they procrastinated on writing a term paper and to indicate how much each of 26 reasons reflects why they procrastinated (1 = *Not at all reflects why I procrastinated;* 5 = *Definitely reflects why I procrastinated*). A factor analysis undertaken by the authors on the reasons why college students procrastinate indicated two factors, namely, fear of failure and task aversiveness.

The PASS has been shown to generate reliable and valid scores (Ferrari, 1989). For the present study, the coefficient alpha reliability estimates of the PASS measures were .84 for the procrastination scale, .85 for the fear of failure factor, and .76 for the task aversiveness factor.

The MPS (Hewitt & Flett, 1991a) is a 45-item, 7-point Likert-format instrument designed to measure three dimensions of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed. A high score on any subscale represents a tendency to be perfectionistic on the dimension measured by that scale. The MPS has been found to possess good psychometric properties and to generate both reliable and valid scores (Hewitt & Flett, 1991a). For the present study, the coefficient alpha reliability estimates of the MPS measures were .86 for self-

TABLE 1 Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of Procrastination Measures and the Perfectionism Dimensions (n = 135)

	Procrastination Measures		
Perfectionism Dimensions	*Overall Academic Procrastination*	*Fear of Failure*	*Task Aversiveness*
Self-Oriented	-.03	.22*	.02
Other-oriented	.01	.05	.07
Socially Prescribed	.24**	.33***	.08

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

oriented perfectionism, .82 for other-oriented perfectionism, and .87 for socially prescribed perfectionism.

RESULTS

The zero-order correlations between the procrastination measures and the dimensions of perfectionism are presented in Table 1. The correlations suggest that overall academic procrastination was positively related to socially prescribed perfectionism, and fear of failure was positively related to self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism. Task aversiveness was not related to any of the perfectionism dimensions.

A canonical correlation analysis was conducted to identify a combination of *reason for procrastination* dimensions (i.e., fear of failure and task aversiveness) which might be correlated with a combination of perfectionism dimensions (i.e., self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed). The canonical analysis revealed that both canonical correlations combined were statistically significant (F [6, 260] = 3.45, $p < .05$). However, when the first canonical root was excluded, the remaining canonical root was not statistically significant, which suggests that the first canonical function was statistically significant, but the second canonical root was not statistically significant. Indeed, the first canonical correlation ($R_{c1} = .37$) appeared to be moderately educationally significant, contributing 13.6% (i.e., R_{c1}^2) to the shared variance. However, the second canonical correlation ($R_{c2} = .09$) did not appear to be educationally significant. Consequently, only the first canonical correlation was interpreted.

Data pertaining to the first canonical root are presented in Table 2. An examination of the standardized canonical function coefficients

TABLE 2 Canonical Solution for First Function

Variable	*Standardized Coefficient*	*Structure Coefficient*	*Structure*^{2}
Perfectionism Dimension			
Self-Oriented	.47*	.62*	.39
Other-Oriented	-.45*	.10	.01
Socially Prescribed	.85*	.89*	.79
Reason for Procrastination Dimension			
Fear of Failure	1.11*	.97*	.94
Task Aversiveness	-.26	.13	.02

**Loadings with large effect sizes*

revealed that, using a cutoff correlation of 0.3 recommended by Lambert and Durand (1975) as an acceptable minimum loading value, all three dimensions of perfectionism made an important contribution to the perfectionism composite—with socially prescribed perfectionism being the major contributor.

With respect to the reason for procrastination set, only fear of failure made a noteworthy contribution to the composite set. The structure coefficients (Table 2) revealed that two of the three dimensions of perfectionism (i.e., self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism) made important contributions to the first canonical variate. The square of the structure coefficient (Table 2) indicated that socially prescribed perfectionism and self-oriented perfectionism explained 79.2% and 38.4% of the variance, respectively. With regard to the reasons for procrastination cluster, again, only fear of failure made a noteworthy contribution, explaining 94.1% of the variance.

Interestingly, other-oriented perfectionism appeared to serve as a suppressor variable, since the standardized coefficients associated with these variables was relatively large, whereas its corresponding structure coefficient was small (Thompson, in press). It is likely that other-oriented perfectionism was a suppressor variable because of its relationship with self-oriented perfectionism ($r = .51$, $p < .001$) and socially prescribed perfectionism ($r = .37$, $p < .001$)—both variables which predicted the dimensions of reasons for academic procrastination. Thus, other-oriented perfectionism appeared to improve the predictive power of self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism by

suppressing variance that is irrelevant to this prediction, as a result of its relationship with these two variables.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between academic procrastination and perfectionism among graduate students. Two major findings emerged. First, overall academic procrastination appears to be related significantly to socially prescribed perfectionism. This finding is identical to Ferrari (1992) and Saddler and Sacks (1993), who found general procrastination to be related to socially prescribed perfectionism but not to either self-oriented perfectionism or other-oriented perfectionism. Second, procrastination resulting from fear of failure is related to self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism, with other-oriented perfectionism serving as a suppressor. Interestingly, socially prescribed perfectionism made a more noteworthy contribution than did self-oriented perfectionism. These findings suggest that procrastination is dependent more on the social context in which it is exhibited than on the intrapersonal context, suggesting that academic procrastination should be considered from a broad social perspective. The fact that fear of failure was related to perfectionism is consistent with the assertion of some researchers (Pacht, 1984) that perfectionists typically are driven more by a fear of failure than by a need for achievement.

One possible explanation of the finding is that perfectionism leads to academic procrastination. In other words, it is likely that academic procrastinators are overly concerned about the standards that others hold for them, how they believed they are evaluated, and the extent to which they are expected by others to be perfect. Indeed, as noted by Onwuegbuzie (1999), some procrastinators engage in perfectionism either in order to produce a flawless product (i.e., self-perfectionism) or to impress others by one's efforts (i.e., socially prescribed perfectionism). In any case, bearing in mind the prevalence, as well as the potentially debilitative nature of academic procrastination and perfectionism, it would be worthwhile for future research to investigate further the causal nature of the relations between these two constructs.

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