

# Tomorrow, I'll Do it Exactly Right: Procrastinating Perfectionists

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# Origins: The Five P's

- *a moment of procrastination early in graduate school, shared for humorous effect...*
- Procrastinate
- Plan
- Panic
- Produce
- Perfect

# Key Concepts

- Procrastination
- Perfectionism
- Motivation
- Goal Orientation
- Achievement Attribution
- Underachievement
- Self-Concealment

# Some Questions....

- Procrastination and perfectionism:
  - overlapping tendencies?
  - contributing and mediating factors?
  - short and long term implications?
  - special issues for gifted individuals?
  - possible educational/counseling responses?

Tomorrow is often the  
busiest day of the week.

*Spanish Proverb*

# Procrastination

- Procrastination as a behavior pattern is *complex*, often *chronic*, and sometimes *defies straightforward causal explanation* (Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995, p. 2)
- Definitions emphasize the *temporal* or *irrational* components of procrastination

# A Synthesis Definition

- Milgram (1991): four components necessary for procrastination:
  - a behavior sequence of postponement;
  - resulting in a **substandard** behavioral product;
  - involving a task that is perceived by the procrastinator as being **important** to perform; and
  - resulting in a state of emotional **upset**.

# The Procrastinator's Excuses...

- "I work better under pressure."
- "I will be more in the mood to work on this after a break/tomorrow."
- "I didn't have time to work on it as much as I wanted."
- "It took longer than I thought it would."
- "My ceiling fell in – I had a ton of other work to do – the dog ate my homework, etc."

# Cognitive Misconceptions Common in Procrastinators

- Overestimation of time left to perform a task
- Underestimation of time necessary to complete a task
- Overestimation of future motivational states
- Misreliance on the necessity of emotional congruence to succeed in a task
- Belief that working when “not in the mood” is unproductive or suboptimal (Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995)

# Procrastination and Perfectionism

- Not all procrastinators are perfectionists.
- Not all perfectionists are procrastinators.
- Emerging evidence demonstrates relationships between *some* perfectionistic patterns and procrastination.

# Perfectionism

- Multidimensional construct
- Key elements include high/impossible standards, concern over mistakes, attribution of success and failure
- Forms of perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991):
  - Self-oriented perfectionism
  - Other-oriented perfectionism
  - Socially prescribed perfectionism

# Associated with Perfectionism

- Depression
- Low self-confidence
- Eating disorders
- Personality disorders
- Anxiety
- Social phobias
- Self-preservation

-- (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Kawamura & Frost, 2004; Speirs-Neumeister, 2004)

# Can Perfectionism be Adaptive?

- Debate regarding adaptive versus maladaptive aspects of perfectionism
- Self-oriented perfectionism has been associated with some positive traits and outcomes, including resourcefulness and intrinsic motivation (Kilbert, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Saito, 2005)
- Clear agreement that socially prescribed perfectionism is generally maladaptive

# Attributions

- How do perfectionists attribute their successes and failures?
  - Differences between groups whose perfectionism highlighted high standards versus concern over mistakes
  - Differences between self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionists
    - Brown et al., 1999; Speirs-Neumeister, 2004)

# Attributions and Perfectionism in College Students

- Qualitative study of 12 self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionists
  - Key findings
    - Socially prescribed perfectionists minimized successes, overgeneralized and inflated failures, and made internal attributions for failure
    - Self-oriented perfectionists made internal attributions for success and situation-specific attributions for failure, though still reported great frustration and anger with failure
- Speirs Neumeister, 2004

# Possible Reasons for the Association of Giftedness and Perfectionism

- Lofty goals requiring conceptual thinking
- Setting standards appropriate to mental age
- Relationships with older friends
- Failure-avoidance as a consequence of lack of challenge
- Striving for perfect performance instead of mastery and for artificial rewards (grades)
- Perfectionistic teachers and competitive peers
- Introversion

- Schuler, 2000

# Procrastination and Perfectionism: Shared Features

- Both are related to increased endorsement of irrational beliefs.
- Both endorse beliefs involving the need for high levels of performance and the need to avoid social disapproval.
- Both are associated with Type A characteristics.
- Both are associated with fear of failure.
  - (Flett, Hewitt, & Martin, 1995)

# Possible Sources of the Connection

- “Escape hatch” offered by the temporal explanation for a task completed to a sub-standard level
  - idiosyncratic definitions of standard and substandard
- Perceived need for “pressure” in order to achieve

# Possible Explanations Cont.

- The challenge of achieving a productive “flow” state for individuals with strong extrinsic motivational tendencies and strong fear of failure
- Coping mechanism for unhealthy perfectionism?
- Past success with the behaviors of procrastination

The most difficult part of  
attaining perfection is  
finding something to do for  
an encore.

*Author Unknown*

# Distinguishing Features

- Linked to distinctions between self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism (Flett, Hewitt, & Martin, 1995)
- “Problematic perfectionists” scored higher than “nonproblematic perfectionists” on scales of Anxiety and Procrastination in the *Almost Perfect Scale* (Johnson & Slaney, 1996)
- Direct linkage between perfectionism generally defined and procrastination is unclear because of the apparent multiple manifestations of perfectionism.

# Which Perfectionists Procrastinate?

- “Procrastination is only exhibited by those individuals who value perfect performance but lack the required intrinsic motivation and self-determination to attain these standards...”  
(Flett, Hewitt, & Martin, 1995, p. 125)
- Kilbert et al (2005) found the following relationships with perfectionism and procrastination:
  - negative correlation between self-oriented perfectionism and procrastination
  - socially prescribed and nonperfectionistic students procrastinated more than generally perfectionistic and self-oriented

# Rewards and Motivation

- Some evidence suggests that external rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation, particularly when those external rewards are performance-contingent
- Tasks are more likely to be linked to intrinsic motivation when they are intrinsically interesting and optimally challenging
  - Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000

# Procrastination and Flow

- High procrastination tendencies linked to lack of self-determined motivation and low incidence of the flow state
- Procrastination significantly negatively correlated with flow scales, also associated with lack of self-determination and high self-consciousness (Lee, 2005)

# Goals and Implicit Theories

- Learning goals and achievement goals
- Incremental and entity theories of intelligence
- Individuals are generally not wholly in one category or another; learning goals and performance goals may co-exist

# Implications of Goal Orientations

- Learning goals are more adaptive and are linked to behaviors such as deep processing strategies
- Performance goals have been linked to learned helplessness and self-handicapping behaviors in the face of challenging tasks; entity view of intelligence may promote seeking low-risk tasks and withdrawing into helplessness when faced with challenge
  - Ablard, 2002; Robinson, 2002; Speirs-Neumeister, 2004

# Increasing Challenge

- Optimal challenge level promotes flow and intrinsic motivation
- Increasing task difficulty may be detrimental to gifted students with strong performance goals if not carefully planned (Ablard, 2002)

# Perfectionistic Self-Preservation

- Unwillingness to admit problems or personal difficulties
- Leads to self-concealment for avoidance of evaluative threat

-- (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Kawamura & Frost, 2004)

# Self-Concealment

- Short-term benefit of self-concealment is avoidance of evaluative threat, but may result in higher levels of psychological distress over time
- Self-concealment can also limit the development of adaptive coping skills such as learning to use feedback and to ask for help
- Significant correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and self-concealment! (Kawamura & Frost, 2004)

# Responding to Procrastination

- Dependent on patterns of task avoidance
  - Procedures designed to reduce anxiety or to boost concern and forethought
- Changing cognitive misconceptions
- Goal-setting and task planning
- Developing self-regulation
- Developing awareness of stress and flow
- Encouraging the process as well as the outcome

# Responding to Underachievement

- Supporting self-efficacy
- Using specific praise and feedback
- Promoting self-regulation skills
- Developing understanding of what students value
- Promoting supportive environmental contexts

- Siegle & McCoach, 2003

# Questions for Exploration...

- How do procrastinating perfectionists create optimal learning contexts in which they may achieve?
- What self-regulation strategies do procrastinating perfectionists in secondary and post-secondary education demonstrate?
- What happens to high-achieving procrastinating perfectionists in the world of work?

Never put off until  
tomorrow what you can do  
the day after tomorrow.

*Mark Twain*