

COMPONENTS OF PERFECTIONISM AND PROCRASTINATION IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

GORDON L. FLETT, KIRK R. BLANKSTEIN, PAUL L. HEWITT AND
SPOMENKA KOLEDIN

*York University, Erindale College University o/Toronto, University of Winnipeg
and York University*

The present research examined the relations between individual differences in perfectionism and procrastinatory behavior in college students. A sample of 131 students (56 males, 75 females) completed measures of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism, as well as measures of academic procrastination and general procrastination. Subjects also completed ratings of factors related to procrastination (i.e., fear of failure, task aversiveness). Correlational analyses revealed it was the socially prescribed perfectionism dimension that was most closely correlated with both generalized procrastination and academic procrastination, especially among males. There were few significant correlations involving self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism. However, the fear of failure component of procrastination was associated broadly with all the perfectionism dimensions. Overall, the results suggest that procrastination stems, in part, from the anticipation of social disapproval from individuals with perfectionistic standards for others.

Procrastination is typically defined as an irrational tendency to delay tasks that should be completed (Lay, 1986). Recently, several authors have sought to examine the nature of individual differences in procrastination from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Ferrari, 1991; Lay & Burns, 1991; McCown & Johnson, 1991). One common belief about the nature of procrastinatory behavior is that it stems from excessively high standards. Several authors have suggested that there is a link between procrastination and perfectionism. For instance, Burka and Yuen (1983) claimed that procrastinators place unrealistic demands on themselves. They observed that procrastinators demonstrate many of the cognitive characteristics associated with perfectionism, including the tendency to endorse the importance of continual success.

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Many other factors suggest a possible link between perfectionism and procrastination. For instance, both perfectionism and procrastination are related to increased endorsement of irrational beliefs (Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988; Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Koledin, 1991). Similarly, a link would be expected based on the fact that both procrastination and perfectionism are associated with excessive fear of failure (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Mosher, 1991; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984).

Although there should be some association, the available research suggests that the relation between perfectionism and procrastination is more complex than past theorists would predict. This complexity stems from recent findings which indicate that the perfectionism construct is multidimensional and has both personal and social components (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1989, 1991 b). For instance, the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale developed by Hewitt and Flett (1989, 1991 b) provides measures of self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Whereas self-oriented perfectionism involves high standards and motivation for the self to attain perfection, other-oriented perfectionism is the tendency to expect others to be perfect. By definition, other-oriented perfectionists engage in various forms of extrapunitive behavior. In contrast, socially prescribed perfectionism is the perception that other people expect oneself to be perfect. Socially prescribed perfectionism is associated with various forms of negative adjustment (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & O'Brien, 1991; Hewitt & Flett, 1991 a, 1991 b; Hewitt, Flett, & Turnbull-Donovan, in press), in part due to the lack of control and exposure to criticism associated with imposed standards of perfection.

Parallel research by Frost and associates (Frost *et al.*, 1990; Frost & Marten, 1990) has resulted in the development of another multidimensional measure of perfectionism. Although the Frost scale does not provide an assessment of other-oriented perfectionism, it does provide subscale measures of both the personal aspects of perfectionism (i.e., high standards, concern with mistakes, doubts about actions, organization) as well as the social pressures believed to produce perfectionism (i.e., high parental expectations, parental criticism). Thus, both measures demonstrate the important distinction between self-determined and imposed standards of perfection.

At present, existing research on perfectionism and procrastination is equivocal. The inconsistency stems, in large part, from the fact that some investigators have studied procrastination and perfectionism from a unidimensional perspective (e.g., Ferrari, 1992; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), while other investigators have studied procrastination and perfectionism from a multidimensional perspective. The studies by Solomon

and Rothblum (1984) and by Ferrari (1992) have found significant links between procrastination and perfectionism. Unfortunately, these findings must be questioned because they have been based on perfectionism measures with uncertain psychometric properties. Moreover, these studies have not examined the different dimensions of perfectionism.

The potential significance of a multidimensional approach was illustrated in a recent study by Frost *et al.* (1990). Frost and associates administered their multidimensional perfectionism scale and a multidimensional measure of academic procrastination to 106 female college students. Surprisingly, the analyses found no significant association between total perfectionism scores and overall frequency of procrastination. Analyses with the various subscales found a significant *negative* correlation between procrastination frequency and high personal standards. However, Frost *et al.* did find that increased procrastination was associated with high parental expectations and high parental criticism. Overall, these data indicate that procrastination may be a response to the expectation that parents will respond to self-characteristics in a punishing manner.

The equivocal nature of past findings in this area suggests the need for further investigation. To our knowledge, the study by Frost *et al.* (1990) is the only study of perfectionism and procrastination that has examined various components of the perfectionism construct. Consequently, the purpose of the present study was to re-examine the seemingly complex association between perfectionism and procrastination. The subjects in the present study were administered the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS; Hewitt & Flett, 1989, 1991b), the Burns Perfectionism Scale (Burns, 1980), and measures of trait procrastination and academic procrastination. Consistent with the findings of Frost *et al.* (1990), it was expected that socially prescribed perfectionism would be associated with increased procrastination. We did not expect a positive association between procrastination and self-oriented perfectionism. The presence of a positive association between these measures would be inconsistent with recent conceptualizations of this perfectionism dimension that emphasize the tendency of self-oriented perfectionists to be high in intrinsic motivation and goal-directedness rather than avoidance tendencies (see Hewitt & Flett, 1991 b).

Another goal of the present study was to re-examine possible factors that may contribute to the relation between perfectionism and procrastination. Fear of failure and task aversiveness are two important components of procrastination (Rothblum, Solomon, & Murakami, 1986; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). Frost *et al.* (1990) included these factors in their study and found that there were significant positive associations between the fear of failure factor and all components of perfectionism except the organization factor of perfectionism. Similarly, the task aversiveness factor was associated

with all but the high personal standards component of perfectionism. In the present study, we examined perfectionism and both fear of failure and task aversiveness. We expected to find a closer link between perfectionism and fear of failure given the fact that many authors have discussed the failure concerns exhibited by perfectionists (e.g., Hamachek, 1978), but few authors have suggested a link between perfectionism and task aversiveness.

METHOD

SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURE

The subjects were 131 undergraduate students (75 females, 56 males), enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Toronto. Subjects were administered the following measures in a random order.

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale.

The Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) is a 45-item self-report measure of perfectionistic tendencies. As mentioned above, it assesses three dimensions: (1) self-oriented perfectionism (e.g., I demand nothing less than perfection of myself); (2) other-oriented perfectionism (e.g., If I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly); and (3) socially prescribed perfectionism (e.g., The people around me expect me to succeed at everything I do). Respondents must rate their agreement with each item on a seven-point scale. Higher scores reflect greater perfectionism. A growing body of evidence suggests that the MPS is multidimensional and the subscales have adequate psychometric properties (Hewitt & Flett, 1991 b; Hewitt, Flett, Turnbull-Donovan, & Mikail, 1991).

Burns Perfectionism Scale.

This scale (Burns, 1980) was included as a second measure of self-oriented perfectionistic attitudes to facilitate comparisons with other studies (e.g., Ferrari, in press). Subjects make five-point ratings of their agreement with such items as "If I don't set the highest standards for myself, I am likely to end up a second-rate person." This scale has acceptable reliability and validity (Hewitt, Mittelstaedt, & Wollert, 1989).

The Lay Procrastination Scale.

The Lay (1986) procrastination scale is a 20-item true-false measure of dispositional levels of procrastination. Subjects are asked to respond to items such as "I am continually saying I'll do it tomorrow". Its validity and reliability have been demonstrated in a variety of contexts (Lay, 1987, 1988; Kusyszyn, 1990). Higher scores reflect greater procrastination. The version for students was used in this study.

The Procrastination Assessment Scale - Students (PASS).

The PASS (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984) provides subjects with six scenarios associated with academic procrastination. A modified version of the PASS was used in the present study. Subjects were asked to make a series of five-point ratings to indicate their frequency of academic procrastination and the extent to which procrastination is considered a problem. In addition, subjects made five-point estimates of the fear of failure and task aversiveness associated with each of the situations. Finally, subjects rated the extent to which they would like to decrease their procrastinatory tendencies.

RESULTS

Initially, multivariate analyses of variance and subsequent univariate analyses were conducted separately on the perfectionism and procrastination measures to examine possible gender differences in mean scores. The multivariate effect of gender was not significant for the perfectionism measures nor was it significant for the procrastination measures.

Next, the correlations between the perfectionism and procrastination measures were computed. These analyses were conducted for the total sample and they were conducted separately for males and females. The results are shown in Table 1. The main finding in the total sample was that socially prescribed perfectionism was associated significantly with most procrastination measures. Socially prescribed perfectionism was correlated positively with scores on the Lay procrastination scale, $r(129) = .30$, $p < .01$, as well as with the frequency of academic procrastination, $r(129) = .21$, $p < .05$, the extent to which academic procrastination is a problem, $r(129) = .28$, $p < .01$, and fear of failure in academic situations, $r(129) = .40$, $p < .01$. In general, the MPS measures of self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism were not associated significantly with procrastination, but these perfectionism dimensions were correlated with increased fear of failure. As for the Burns scale, it can be seen in Table 1 that this perfectionism measure was correlated significantly with scores on the LAY procrastination measure and with the

frequency of academic procrastination, the extent to which procrastination is a problem and fear of failure.

TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PERFECTIONISM AND PROCRASTINATION MEASURES FOR THE TOTAL SAMPLE, MALES AND FEMALES

	Self	Perfectionism Dimensions		
		Other	Social	Burns
<i>Procrastination Measures</i>				
<i>Total Sample</i>				
Lay Procrastination	-.02	.01	.30**	.27**
PASS-Frequency	.07	.08	.21*	.22*
PASS-Problem	.09	-.01	.28**	.22*
PASS-Task Aversiveness	.03	.09	.08	.12
PASS-Fear of Failure	.19*	.18*	.40**	.26**
PASS-Desire to Decrease	.11	.16	.13	.13
<i>Males</i>				
Lay Procrastination	.11	-.02	.50**	.36**
PASS-Frequency	.17	.09	.32*	.32*
PASS-Problem	.04	-.14	.37*	.30*
PASS-Task Aversiveness	-.03	-.03	.04	.16
PASS-Fear of Failure	.10	.19	.39*	.32*
PASS-Desire to Decrease	.14	.12	.20	.19
<i>Females</i>				
Lay Procrastination	.15	.01	.11	.15
PASS-Frequency	-.03	.06	.09	.10
PASS-Problem	.14	.10	.20	.14
PASS-Task Aversiveness	.09	.21	.14	.26*
PASS-Fear of Failure	.27*	.22	.46**	.14
PASS-Desire to Decrease	.09	.21	.10	.11

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Based on the data from 131 subjects (56 males, 75 females).

Interestingly, separate correlational analyses by gender indicated that the link between perfectionism and procrastination may be stronger for males. Few significant correlations were obtained for females. The primary exception was that both self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism were associated with fear of failure among females. In contrast, many significant correlations were obtained for males. These results are also displayed in Table 1. Consistent with the results for the total sample, most of the procrastination measures were correlated positively with socially prescribed perfectionism and scores on the Burns Scale.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to clarify the association between perfectionism and procrastination by examining the perfectionism construct from a multidimensional perspective. Overall, the results provided a great deal of insight into the nature of the perfectionism-procrastination link. The main finding was a significant association between socially prescribed perfectionism and indices of procrastination. This finding is generally consistent with the results of Frost *et al.* (1990) who found that the frequency of academic procrastination was associated positively with reports of high parental expectations and high parental criticism. These data are also consistent with certain findings reported by Milgram, Sroloff, and Rosenbaum (1988). Milgram *et al.* (1988) examined procrastination on everyday tasks and found that procrastination was associated with "covert negativism". Covert negativism was conceptualized as the extent to which a task is perceived as an imposition and the person resents being forced to do the task. This is similar though not identical to socially-prescribed perfectionism, in which an individual perceives that other people are imposing unrealistic demands on the self.

On the surface, our results involving self-oriented perfectionism were contradictory. There were few significant correlations between procrastination and the MPS self-oriented perfectionism subscale. In contrast, there were many significant correlations between procrastination and the Burns Perfectionism Scale. The key to understanding these results rests in another observation - namely, that the findings with the Burns Scale tended to parallel the findings with the NIPS socially prescribed perfectionism subscale. Close examination of certain items on the Burns scale suggests that this measure has items that assess not only levels of perfectionism, but also fearful reactions to failure that stem, in part, from the expected reactions of others (e.g., People will think less of me if I make a mistake). That is, the Burns scale should probably be regarded as a mixed measure of perfectionism that combines both the self and social aspects of perfectionism.

Social evaluation content in the Burns scale would account for other findings with this perfectionism measure (e.g., Ferrari, in press) which indicate that perfectionism is associated with a variety of defensive reactions including self-presentation, self-handicapping, public self-consciousness, and social anxiety.

Interestingly, the pattern of findings in our study indicated that the link between socially prescribed perfectionism and procrastination was somewhat greater for males than for females. Any attempts to account for this difference would be purely speculative at this juncture. Clearly, the current findings require replication. Several factors could have contributed to these differences between males and females, including gender-related differences in reactions to loss of control, affiliative behaviors, and the need to manage public impressions. The important point is that future research on both perfectionism and procrastination must examine possible gender differences.

A related purpose of our study was to examine the link between perfectionism and two factors that contribute to procrastination - fear of failure and task aversiveness. The most significant finding was that socially prescribed perfectionism was associated with greater fear of failure for both males and females. There were few significant correlations involving task aversiveness. In their study, Frost et al. (1990) reported that dimensions of perfectionism were associated significantly with both fear of failure and task aversiveness. However, in the Frost et al. study, the correlations with task aversiveness tended, on average, to be substantially lower than the correlations involving fear of failure. Overall, fear of failure seems to be most central to perfectionism, especially for those individuals who expect others to be punitive in their expectations (see Hamachek, 1978).

Several caveats about the current findings are in order. First, although the present findings indicated a link between perfectionism and procrastination, the correlations were not large in magnitude. One possible explanation is that different types of procrastinators (eg., optimistic procrastinators versus pessimistic procrastinators) have been identified in recent research (Lay, 1987, 1988; McCown, Johnson, & Petzel, 1989), but no attempt was made in the present study to identify subgroups of procrastinators. Further examination of types of procrastinators may further clarify the association between perfectionism and procrastination.

Second, the present study has demonstrated a link between socially prescribed perfectionism and procrastination, but causal statements are not warranted on the basis of our data. Although the perceived presence of high social standards may lead to procrastinatory behavior, it is equally feasible that some unidentified "third" variable accounts for the link between procrastination and perfectionism.

Finally, the generalizability of these findings must be examined in samples that do not consist of college students. A particularly important focus will be research on perfectionism and procrastination in children and adolescents. Such research may provide important information about the developmental course of the perfectionism-procrastination link as well as the causal sequence, if it does indeed exist.

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Address correspondence and reprint requests to:

GORDON L. FLETT,
York University
Department of Psychology
Behavioral Sciences Building
4700 Keele Street
North York, Ontario M3J 1P3
Canada