

Understanding and Addressing Procrastination: Analysis from Psychological Research on Factors and Characteristics Associated

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ABSTRACT

Exploring factors associated with procrastination is crucial for student life worldwide. This paper examines psychological influences and characteristics related to procrastination, especially focusing on how causal attribution style, emotional regulation, and fear of failure influence procrastination. This paper also discussed consequences of procrastination, such as higher stress levels and lower self-esteem in order to emphasize its significance as an issue. By reviewing two studies, analyzing, and comparing them, this paper hopes to provide potential inspiration on strategies for professionals to help mitigate procrastination among students & improve their overall health. The understanding given by investigating procrastination should prompt better support systems that address the root causes of procrastination and guide students to a positive direction in life.

Topic Introduction

TED-Ed (2022) found procrastination as the avoidance of tasks for no apparent reason despite knowing this avoidance will lead to negative consequences. It is the result of the body attempting to protect against the perceived “threat” of a task. For example, a student needs to write a paper. Their brain responds as if it is a threat: the amygdala causes the adrenal glands to release adrenaline, that “panic” that is caused overpowers the rational thought of the prefrontal cortex, and the student ends up avoiding the task for something less stressful. While procrastinating, the perception of the task's difficulty increases, essentially making it harder to start the longer a person waits. Procrastination feeds from negative feelings. Generally, people with difficulty regulating their emotions are more likely to procrastinate. They often have a high fear of failure and low self-esteem.

Significance

Procrastination is a wide spread problem; 80 percent to 95 percent of students are reported to procrastinate (Novotney, 2010). Habitual procrastinators frequently have problems with anxiety, depression, shame, and suffer from higher stress levels (TED-Ed, 2022). This is a clear problem. Understanding what factors lead to procrastination, learning the characteristics frequently associated with procrastination, and identifying the hallmark cognitive process of procrastinators is crucial because it helps to stop procrastination. Only by understanding the inner workings of procrastination can it be beaten. Procrastination makes it feel impossible to get started partly because the person does not know what the task truly entails. Analogous to that, it is important to study procrastination so it can be limited in its reach.

Study 1

Research Methods

The study titled “Academic Procrastination: The Relationship Between Causal Attribution Styles and Behavioral Postponement” conducted by Rahim Badri Gargari et al. (2011) examined the relationship between causal attribution style and behavioral postponement. Causal attribution style refers to how a person decides on the cause of an event; the two general types of attribution being internal and external. An internal attribution style is the belief an event happened because of a person’s own ability and suggests an internal locus of control. External attribution style refers to the belief that an event happened because of something out of a person’s control- like luck, coincidence, or fate, and is associated with a external locus of control.

This correlational study viewed the relationship between the type of attribution style and behavioral postponement (procrastination). They used 203 undergraduate students [55 males, 148 females], all English & French Language or History students from Tabriz University. Data was collected using the Procrastination Assessment Scale-student (PASS) and Causal Dimension Scale (CDA). Students filled out these questionnaires and the results were analyzed. In order to conclude the data gathered as valid, it was investigated with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, histogram, and M box test respectively. Correlational studies allow naturally occurring relationships to be detected and show how well the presence of one variable predicts the presence of the other. In this study “Academic Procrastination: The Relationship Between Causal Attribution Styles and Behavioral Postponement”, the relationship between causal attribution style and procrastination was investigated.

Limitations to Research

The aforementioned study is unable to determine causation; it cannot be stated that a specific attribution style causes procrastination. The method of the study also allows for the possibility of a third variable (that affects both causal attribution style and procrastination) to undermine the findings of the study. The study has limitations with generalizability- the sample contains only students- all from ages 18-29 and all attending Tabriz university (Badri Gargari et al., 2011).

Results

The study, “Academic Procrastination: The Relationship Between Causal Attribution Styles and Behavioral Postponement”, found that there was a “meaningful and positive relation was observed between the locus of control and stability in failure context and procrastination” (Badri Gargari et al., 2011). An inner locus of control correlates with doing better in failure and not procrastinating. Students who relate success to internal factors (an internal causal attribution style) correlate with low procrastination. Students who relate success to external factors (an external causal attribution style) correlate with high procrastination.

Study 2

Research Methods

The study, “Differences in Learning Characteristics Between Students With High, Average, and Low Levels of Academic Procrastination: Students’ Views on Factors Influencing Their Learning” conducted by Visser, Lennart et al. (2018) can be characterized as a descriptive study. This “qualitative interview study” examines the differences in

learning characteristics and influential factors on academic procrastination among students with low, average, or high procrastination tendencies. The students' academic procrastination level was measured using the Academic Procrastination State Inventory (APSI). They interviewed 22 students [7 male, 15 female], all freshmen in a teacher education program at a teachers college in the Netherlands. The students took the APSI and were sorted in accordance to their scores into the categories of high-procrastination student (HP), average-procrastination student (AP), and low-procrastination student (LP).

They were then interviewed and asked questions, each pertaining to characteristics the researchers wanted to investigate. Interviews covered questions such as: the reason for choosing this degree program, study methods, engagement with study activities, thoughts during failure, thoughts during success, self-appreciation methods, and expectations of results. The interviewers did not know the participants and had no prior relationship with them. The advantages of a descriptive study such as this one is that it allows behavior to be observed and recorded. In this study, distinct characteristics, behavior, and outlooks can be seen generally when comparing students with different procrastination levels. Differences can be exposed. Patterns are found (Visser et al., 2018).

Limitations to Research

The study has limited generalizability. The small sample size contains only 22 people- all students in the same educational program and all from ages 16-22. The study is qualitative, focusing on the perspective of the participants. Social desirability affects the participants during the interview; participants might change their answers to be more socially acceptable. Also, given the subjective nature of the questions the conclusions that can be drawn must be done with caution. Finally, the answers the participants give during the interview are self-reported behaviors- which cannot be verified and are unreliable.

Results

The Visser et al. study (2018) analyzed the six patterns that emerged from the interviews. LP students were intrinsically motivated in their decision to become a teacher, set no preconditions to start with study activities, were intrinsically motivated to engage in study activities (to gain knowledge), during failure would remain positive and focused, are satisfied with the person they are, and believe in their own efforts. HP students are not fully committed to becoming a teacher and consider quitting, need preconditions in order to start study activities, quit a learning activity if it is deemed stupid or boring, judge themselves negatively during failure, have moments of not being satisfied with who they are and place value on other's view of them, and feel no stress about exams (Visser et al., 2018).

Comparison

The Rahim Badri Gargari et al. study (Iranian study) (2011) and the study conducted by Visser, Lennart et al. (Dutch study) (2018) both dealt broadly with the topic of procrastination, focusing in on factors that influence it. There were differences between the studies. Regarding methods, the Iranian study was a correlational study while the Dutch study was a descriptive, "qualitative interview" study and utilized an interview to gain data about the participants. Additionally, the Iranian study had a large sample size: 203 compared to the 22 in the Dutch study. Regarding limitations, the Iranian study allowed for the possibility of a third variable while the Dutch study did not (as the Dutch study did not examine the relationship between any factors, only observed them). However, the Dutch study was influenced by social desirability in the interview and from the subjective nature of the questions. Regarding results, the Iranian study found there is a significant relationship between causal attribution style and procrastination, while the Dutch study only investigated the patterns of characteristics between differing procrastination-level students. In general, the Iranian study focused on the relationship between causal attribution style and procrastination while the Dutch study focused on differences between low average and high procrastination students.

There were similarities between the studies. Regarding methods, both studies provided valid procrastination assessments (Iranian study: PASS, Dutch study: APSI). Regarding limitations, both had limited generalizability, though for different reasons. Neither can determine causation. Both studies used samples of relative similarity, being students in a college-level program. Regarding results, both studies draw a connection between locus of control and procrastination.

Application

The findings of these studies can shape educational programs in the future. The Dutch study finds when HP students believe a study activity is irrelevant, they become unengaged and do not do it (Visser et al., 2018). Based off this, teachers should adjust the activities they give students to be relevant and engaging, i.e. no “busy work”. Additionally, they should provide the reason for the activity’s purpose in teaching the subject.

Both studies mention the importance of intrinsic motivation related to procrastination- students with low procrastination are intrinsically motivated to learn, to be, and to do (Visser et al., 2018). Counselors who give career advice to students must apply this knowledge when giving advice. They must question the students’ motivation to apply for a major; HP students in the Dutch study were found to not be intrinsically motivated and consider dropping out (Visser et al., 2018). Counselors asking the simple question of “why?” can prevent students from being halfway through a major they do not want to do, procrastinating madly, and having the health problems associated with it before dropping it.

HP students tend to judge themselves negatively when they fail and place great importance on the view other people have of them (Visser et al., 2018). With this knowledge, students should take steps to protect their mental health such as putting positive reminders on their phone, raise awareness about the impact procrastination can have on mental health, work on their response to stress, etcetera.

Relevance

The studies reviewed in this article tie into influential scientific ideas and psychological concepts. A correlational study is a study that investigates the relationship between two variables (Myers & DeWall, 2018). Badri Gargari et al., (2011) utilized a correlational study to view the relationship between causal attribution style and academic procrastination.

The amygdala is a part of the brain in the limbic system which main function is as a center for emotion (Myers & DeWall, 2018). The amygdala is involved in threat identification and causes the alarm that occurs when a person realizes they must do a task they have been procrastinating on; their amygdala causes the adrenal glands to release adrenaline which make the person panic and pick something less stressful to do- textbook procrastination (TED-Ed, 2022).

The locus of control refers to how much a person believes they control their own fate (Myers & DeWall, 2018). For example, a person with an internal locus of control believes that they control their own destiny while a person with an external locus of control believes that external factors such as “luck” or “coincidence” controls their fate. Causal attribution can be called a part of locus of control- how a person determines the cause of an event is related to their personal sense of what controls their life. For example, an internal causal attribution style suggests an internal locus of control. Badri Gargari et al., (2011) focused on the relationship between causal attribution style and procrastination and found that an external causal attribution style is correlated with higher procrastination.

Intrinsic motivation is doing a behavior “for the sake of doing it” (Myers & DeWall, 2018); for example, if a person participates in the sport of basketball because they like the sport itself, they are intrinsically motivated. The Dutch study found that LP students were intrinsically motivated in their career choice and in their engagement with study activities (Visser et al., 2018).

Rationalization occurs in order to alleviate anxiety. A Freudian coping mechanism, rationalization is making up a justification for an action known to be “wrong” (Myers & DeWall, 2018). For example, a person watches television instead of working on their paper due tomorrow. They rationalize by thinking along the lines of, “Oh, I wouldn’t do good on the paper anyway. I might as well watch TV.” This is a hallmark tool of procrastination. Rationalization is used to distance oneself from the anxiety procrastination causes.

Conclusions

Procrastination is a problem that many people around the world face. It stems from more than just laziness. This multifaceted time management issue connects with emotional regulation, stress handling, fear of failure, motivation, attribution style, and locus of control. The findings from the studies highlight the importance of understanding procrastination in its full context. Examining studies which delve deeper into the characteristics and factors influencing procrastination provide insight for further use in productive applications of the research. It allows for educators, counselors, and students to better deal with procrastination. In this way, the physical and mental health of students worldwide should be prioritized.

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