DOING IT NOW OR LATER? CORRELATES, PREDICTORS AND PREVENTION OF ACADEMIC, DECISIONAL AND GENERAL PROCRASTINATION AMONG STUDENTS IN AUSTRIA

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1 INTRODUCTION

Procrastination has been defined as the tendency to postpone that which is necessary to reach some goal. Because of its negative consequences (e.g., poor grades, course withdrawal), higher education policy is called upon to deal with the problem of procrastination, especially in light of the increasing average duration of studies.

This study is unique because of its inclusion, in an investigation of 480 Austrian students, of a wide range of psychological constructs found to be related to procrastination. The following set of itemnaires was used: Procrastination Assessment Scale-Students, Decisional Procrastination Scale, General Procrastination Scale, Self-Regulation Questionnaire, Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, Ways of Coping Checklist and Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale.

2 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The specific aims of this study are as follows:

1. Are there any differences in the frequency of academic, decisional and general procrastination between male and female students?
2. What are the personality correlates and predictors (i.e., self-regulation, perfectionism, coping) of procrastination?
3. Is there any association between procrastination and psychological well-being (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress)?

4 SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE

480 Austrian undergraduate students (116 males, 356 females) from the University of Applied Sciences Joanneum, Graz. Mean age was 22.90 years (SD = 3.40), most participants were single (96.2%). The study was carried out voluntarily, anonymously and confidentially.

5 INSTRUMENTS

Self-report questionnaires to be answered on 5-point resp. 4-point Likert-type scales:

- Procrastination Assessment Scale-Students (PASS; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984)

First part: frequency of procrastination is assessed in four academic tasks: course work, examination, administrative tasks and lecture attendance

Total score includes degree of procrastination and degree to which procrastination is a problem

Second part of the PASS: 25 given reasons for procrastination on writing a term paper are rated

- Decisional Procrastination Scale (Mann, 1982)

To measure procrastination tendency in making decisions - 5 items

- General Procrastination Scale (GP; Lay, 1996)

To assess global tendencies towards procrastination across a variety of daily tasks - 20 items

- Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ; Casey, Neill & Collins, 2004)

To measure the generalized ability to regulate behaviour to achieve desired future outcomes - 31 items

- Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMP; Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993)

To assess perfectionism across six dimensions: concern over mistakes, personal standards, parental expectations, parental criticism, doubts about actions and organization - 35 items

- Ways of Coping Checklist Questionnaire (WOCC; Folkman & Lazarus, 1984)

To measure problem-focused and emotion-focused coping - 42 items

- Rumination subscale of the perfectionism inventory (Hill, Huesman, Furr, Kibler, Vicente, & Kennedy, 2004)

To measure a tendency to obsessively worry about past errors, or less than perfect performance - 7 items

- Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)

To assess psychological well-being related to depression, anxiety and stress items - 42 items

6 RESULTS

Gender Differences

Means for total academic, decisional and general procrastination

Means for four academic tasks in the total sample and for male and female students

Percentages of participants with chronic academic procrastination

Scores of the first part of the PASS were converted into Z scores:

11.9% of all student respondents scored higher than +1 SD on the Z scores and may be regarded as chronic academic procrastinators.

Reasons for academic procrastination

Five most common reasons (out of 26) for academic procrastination (PASS second part)

Percentage of students who rated the item as “definitely reflects why I procrastinate”

Correlates of procrastination

Correlations between procrastination, self-regulatory behaviour, perfectionism, coping styles, rumination and psychological well-being

Self-regulatory behaviour (SRQ)

1. Concern over mistakes
2. Personal standards
3. Parental expectations
4. Parental criticism
5. Doubts about actions
6. Organization

Coping strategies (WOCC)

1. Problem-focused coping
2. Emotion-focused coping
3. Ruminating

Psychological well-being (DASS)

1. Depression
2. Anxiety
3. Stress

High academic, decisional and general procrastination is associated with deficient self-regulatory behaviour, suggesting that high procrastinators report to be less able to regulate their behaviour in order to achieve desired outcomes.

The results regarding the different aspects of perfectionism are less consistent, except for organization and doubts about actions: procrastinating students are less able to organize themselves, report more doubt about actions, general ability to achieve tasks and express rumination, agreeing to statements like: “After I turn a project in, I can’t stop thinking of how it could have been better”, and “When I make an error, I generally can’t stop thinking about it”.

In line with our hypothesis significant negative correlations are found between procrastination and problem-focused coping, whereas a positive correlation is found between procrastination and emotion-focused coping.

With regard to psychological well-being, higher scores on procrastination are associated with a higher level of depression, anxiety and stress.

Predictors of procrastination

Results from standard multiple regression analyses (tables not shown) where academic, general, and decisional tasks were used as a dependent variable are in line with our hypothesis quoted:

Self-regulation, organization, doubts about actions and rumination are significant predictors of academic, decisional and general procrastination, indicating that one’s inability to persistently pursue long-term study goals and to be orderly or organized, one’s self-doubt in achieving a specific task, one’s inability to obsessively worry about past performance allow for conclusive predictions with regard to procrastination.

7 CONCLUSION AND INTERVENTION

Over the last decades, there are numerous interventions in the development of prevention and intervention programmes to enable students to improve their self-regulation and in particular their organisational abilities. Successful prevention programmes against procrastination focused on project management tools (time and content planning and monitoring) on the one hand, and the strengthening of psychological and motivational personal resources on the other hand.

To overcome the challenges for later professional careers, students are faced with a thesis project, which needs to be managed. Dividing the project into subtasks (modules), as is common practice in project management, supports self-regulation, organization and problem-focused coping, thus facilitating the prevention of procrastination.

Schedule for a Thesis project (Aschermann, 2006)