Applying Explanatory Style to Academic Procrastination

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To better understand procrastination, researchers have sought to identify cognitive personality factors associated with it. The study reported here attempts to extend previous research by exploring the application of explanatory style to academic procrastination. Findings of the study are discussed from the perspective of employers of this new generation.

INTRODUCTION

Procrastination is the tendency to delay or completely avoid responsibilities, decisions, or tasks that need to be done (Haycock, McCarthy, & Skay 1998, Tuckman and Sexton 1989). According to Lay (1986) procrastination means "the putting off of that which is necessary to reach some goal" (p. 475). Solomon and Rothblum (1984) define procrastination as "the act of needlessly delaying tasks to the point of experiencing subjective discomfort" (p.503). Procrastination involves knowing that one is supposed to perform an activity, and perhaps even wanting to do so, yet failing to motivate oneself to perform the activity within the desired or expected time (Senecal, Koestner, & Vallerand 1995).

Most people have some implicit theory about why they procrastinate. Burka and Yuen (1982, p.32) noted that those who have serious problems with procrastination generally tend to attribute their difficulties to personality flaws, such as being lazy, undisciplined, or not knowing how to organize their time. Trait procrastinators are thought to engage in dilatory behavior for a diversity of reasons. These include the protection of their self-esteem through self-handicapping, a demonstration of autonomy, the avoidance of aversive tasks, an avoidance of state anxiety, a response to their fear of failure or perfectionist tendencies, and because they lack self-regulation and self-management capabilities (Burka & Yuen 1982, Solomon & Rothblum 1984).

Procrastination is, at times, a serious problem. Internal consequences of procrastinatory behavior may include irritation, regret, despair, and self-blame (Burka & Yuen 1983). External consequences can include impaired work and academic progress, strained relationships, and lost opportunities (Burka & Yuen 1983, Carr 2001). Despite these negative effects and a growing request for help by procrastinators in both academic and business environments (Burka & Yuen 1983), procrastination remains a relatively poorly understood phenomenon (Haycock et al. 1998).

Researchers who have studied academic procrastination estimate that as many as 95% of American college students purposefully delay beginning or completing tasks and that as many as 70% of college students engage in frequent procrastination (Ellis & Knaus 1977). There is growing evidence that procrastination results in detrimental academic performance, including poor grades and course withdrawal (Semb et al. 1979). Doctoral student procrastination may result in failure to finish dissertations (Haycock et al. 1998). Gallagher, Golin and Kelleher (1992) found that 52% of surveyed students indicated having a moderate to high need for help concerning procrastination, making it the most frequently cited personal concern for which they needed help.

The exploratory research project discussed in this paper is oriented toward providing a better understanding of the concept of procrastination and of the effects of explanatory style on

academic procrastinatory behavior among undergraduate business students. Explanatory style is a cognitive personality variable that was introduced in the reformulation of learned helplessness and depression model, where it accounts for the variability in people's responses to noncontingent negative events (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale 1978). Explanatory style was previously termed attributional style and refers to the characteristic ways people explain the causes of bad events involving themselves along three dimensions of causality: locus, stability, and globality (Peterson & Seligman 1984). People who characteristically explain negative events with internal ("This is due to something about me") versus external ("This is due to other people or circumstances"), stable ("Things will never change") versus unstable ("Next time, maybe things will be different"), and global ("This happens to me in many different circumstances") versus specific ("This happens to me only under certain circumstances") causes are said to have a pessimistic explanatory style that puts them at risk for depression when bad events occur (Peterson & Seligman 1984).

Researchers have begun to examine explanatory style in its own right as a basic individual difference, extending it to questions and topics not explicitly part of the original helplessness model or its revisions (Peterson & Park 1998; Seligman & Schulman, 1986). Researchers have correlated explanatory style with a variety of outcomes, including chronic gambling and binge eating (Peterson 1991b). Peterson and Park (1998) state that the conclusion suggested by these studies is that explanatory style "is a basic individual difference tapping something very important about people" (Peterson & Park 1998, p. 296).

To better understand procrastination, researchers have sought to identify cognitive personality factors associated with it (for a review, see Ferrari, Parker & Ware 1992). The study reported here attempts to extend previous research by exploring the application of explanatory style to academic procrastination. We examined the relationship between students' explanatory style scores (as measured by the Academic Attributional Style Questionnaire) and their procrastination scores (as measured by the Academic Procrastination Questionnaire). Outcomes from such research may serve in the development of remedial strategies to counsel the student population. In accord with presumed effects on motivation and morale, we expected that students with pessimistic attributional styles would procrastinate more relative to students with optimistic attributional styles (those who minimize negative outcomes by shifting blame onto external, unstable, and specific causes) (Sellers & Peterson 1993, p 431).

METHOD

Eighty students (43 males; 37 females) aged 19-24 who were enrolled in Consumer Behavior during the fall 2003 semester at a large state-supported university in the southeast completed the Academic Attributional Style Questionnaire (AASQ) (Peterson and Barrett 1987). The AASQ measures individual differences in the use of locus, stability, and globality dimensions of causality. The questionnaire presents subjects with 12 hypothetical bad academic events involving themselves, such as not having high enough grades to switch to a desired major or not getting all the reading done that an instructor assigns. In each case, subjects are asked to imagine the event happening to them. They then write down the event's major cause and rate it on 7-point scales in terms of internality (7) versus externality (1), stability (7) versus instability (1), and globality (7) versus specificity (1). Composite scores for the three dimensions of locus, stability, and globality and a composite explanatory style are created by summing the appropriate items and dividing the sum by the number of items in the composite. Coefficient alpha for the

composite explanatory style scale was .54 for the current sample indicating internal consistency was quite modest.

Questions are still being raised about both the meaning and measurement of explanatory style (Peterson 1991a, 1991b). Although perceptions of control occupied a central role in the development of learned helplessness theory, when attributional style was introduced learned helplessness theory was modified so that it no longer referred to uncontrollable events but instead to bad events (Sellers & Peterson1993). Some researchers argue that perceived controllability of a bad life event is important in understanding how explanatory style influences reactions to it (Sellers & Peterson 1993; Weiner 1991). The current research addresses controllability because several studies suggest that it may be advantageous for a person to view *controllable* negative events as internally, stably, and globally caused (Brown & Siegal 1988, Sellers and Peterson 1993). Importance ratings were also included here in light of the possibility that the proposed relationship of explanatory style and procrastination would occur more strongly for important events than for unimportant events.

The Academic Procrastination Questionnaire (APQ) (Day, Mensink, & O'Sullivan 2000) was used to measure procrastination. The questionnaire is about procrastination on academic work: four types of academic tasks (regular assigned readings, studying for quizzes/tests/exams, writing papers, and other assignments) and academic work in general. For each item, respondents are asked to rate the degree to which they procrastinate on a five-point scale from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (5). A composite score is formed by summing across the five items and dividing five. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the measure was .81 for the current sample indicating good internal consistency reliability.

Although many students indicate needing help for overcoming procrastination (Gallagher et al. 1992), and there are case descriptions of students whose performance has been hurt by procrastination (Burka & Yuen 1983), correlation analyses of the overall relationship of procrastination and academic performance have indicated typically either only very weak negative links (Rothblum, Solomon, & Murakami 1986) or no association (Lay 1986, Solomon & Rothblum 1984). In order to examine the impact of self-reported procrastination on students' overall academic performance, current grade point ratios (GPR) were obtained from official university sources. Grade points were cumulative through the previous semester. Total course points accumulated in Consumer Behavior also served as a performance measure. Points were obtained in the course by means of standardized, machine-graded examinations.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents bivariate correlation coefficients for the four study variables of *Course Points, GPR, Gender (*coded female = 0: male = 1), and *Composite Procrastination*. Composite Procrastination scores were not found to be statistically related to either of the performance measures or to student gender. A significant and positive relationship was detected between *Course Points* and *GPR*. This indicates that students who had higher grade points also earned more points in the course. Significant and negative relationships were found between *Gender* and *Course Points* and *Gender* and *GPR*. This indicates that females in our sample outperformed males in college overall and in Consumer Behavior.

The tentative assumptions of our study were tested by correlating attribution measures with *Composite Procrastination* (see Table 2). Correlations of attribution measures with *Course Points, GPR, and Gender* are also shown in Table 2. Only one of the three explanatory style

dimension variables, *Locus*, was found to be statistically linked to *Composite Procrastination*. This positive correlation means that students whose scores represented an internal explanatory style were more likely to procrastinate than students with an external explanatory style. The positive correlation between *Locus* and *Gender* indicates that males were more likely than females to have scores representing an internal explanatory style. Zero-order correlation coefficients of most interest here are the statistically significant and negative correlation between *Importance* and *Composite Procrastination* and the statistically significant positive correlation between *Controllability* and *Composite Procrastination*. This indicates that students who tended to rate negative academic outcomes as important and see them as uncontrollable tended to procrastinate less than students who tended to rate these events as unimportant and controllable.

Table1
Correlations* of Composite Procrastination with Descriptor Variables

		1	*2*	*3*	*4*
1.	Course Points	--	.52[a]	-.37[a]	-.15
2.	GPR		--	-.37[a]	-.01
3.	Gender			--	.17
4.	Composite Procrastination				--

* Pearson product-moment correlations
[a]p<.001

Table 2
Correlations* of Attribution Scores with Composite Procrastination, Performance Measures, and Gender

	Composite Procrastination	*Course Points*	*GPR*	*Gender*
Locus	.28[b]	.02	-.17	.25[c]
Stability	-.03	.06	-.01	.15
Globality	.02	.04	-.05	.07
Composite Style	.13	.06	-.10	-.21[d]
Importance	-.42[a]	.23[c]	.16	-.28[b]
Controllability	.37[a]	-.03	-.12	.25[c]

* Pearson product-moment correlations
[a]p<.001
[b]p<.01
[c]p<.05
[d]p<.10

In order to examine the relationship between procrastination and all of the predictor variables of interest, a simultaneous multiple linear regression was conducted. Student gender, both performance measures, causality dimensions, and the importance and controllability measures were entered into the regression equation. The regression model, summarized in

Table 3, accounted for 32% of the variance in procrastination. In reviewing the standardized betas, the coefficients for *Importance* and *Controllability* are the two largest, suggesting they are the strongest and only two significant predictors of procrastination ($p = .001$ and $p = .05$, respectively).

Table3
Summary of Simultaneous Multiple Linear Regression Model for Variables Predicting Procrastination

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	ß	*t*	*p*
Gender	-.413	.963	-.055	-.429	.669
GPR	1.122	.878	.173	1.278	.206
Course Points	-.018	.017	-.138	-1.039	.303
Locus	.009	.085	.019	.105	.916
Stability	.018	.056	.044	.330	.743
Globality	.016	.040	.048	.396	.694
Importance	-.170	.048	-.419	-3.568	.001
Controllability	.142	.072	.340	1.967	.054

Note: $N = 67$. $R^2 = .317$, $F(8, 59) = 3.42$, $p = .003$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Van Eerde (2003) writes that "procrastination is not necessarily dysfunctional" (p. 421) arguing that the outcome of procrastination may only lead to time pressure and that for easy, boring, or routine tasks, time pressure may simply create a challenge and may lead to finishing a task faster. There are other positive consequences of procrastination. Procrastination has been shown to function as a temporary relief from stress and as a strategic effort to better a bad mood temporarily (Tice, Bratslavsky, & Banmeister 2001). We all procrastinate sometimes, and for different reasons. Findings of the present study suggest that procrastination among Generation Y business majors may not impede their academic performance. The limitations of our study's design and measurements do not allow us to generalize this finding to procrastination among members of this generation and their ability to achieve at work. Our findings do suggest research extensions that can be tested empirically.

Contrary to expectations, a pessimistic cognitive style that includes internal, stable, and global attributions for bad outcomes was not found in this study to play a role in procrastination. However, upper-level business students in our sample who tend to blame themselves for bad academic outcomes reported higher levels of procrastination than those with tendencies to shift the blame for bad events in their lives to other people or circumstances. Virtually all theoretical writing of learned helplessness state or imply that perceptions of future controllability are crucial determinants of learned helplessness and depression effects. College students in our sample tending to perceive stressors in their lives as controllable reported higher levels of

procrastination than their colleagues inclined to view them as uncontrollable. Results of a regression analysis showed that the controllability of bad events was a significant and positive predictor of procrastination. Students in our sample viewing negative academic events as unimportant reported higher levels of procrastination than those viewing them as important. Regression results showed that the importance of negative events was a significant and inverse predictor of procrastination.

In the past, most of us have been told that procrastination is a bad habit. According to Chase (2003), a management skills consultant, this assumption has always been based on the idea that people who put things off are lazy and unfocused, and assumes, mistakenly, that there is enough time in our world today to complete everything that needs to be completed. Chase goes on to say that this is not practical and that the assumption that procrastination is a bad habit is out-of-date and irrelevant in today's world. He notes that there is a difference between putting off doing something because one does not want to do it, and putting off doing something because it is not important right now, the latter he says "is a highly desirable time management skill" in today's business climate (p, 60). Chase (2003) tells business professionals "if you are going to be a successful business person, you are going to have to learn to put some things off" because you cannot do everything" (p. 61). He goes on to say that business professionals must become "skilled procrastinators" -- that procrastination is the "new master skill of time management" (p.60). "Skilled" means, he says, making sure that the right items are procrastinated knowing how to select between what gets "put off" and what must be done "on time." Results of our exploratory study suggest that today's business undergraduates may already possess those skills.

In conclusion, findings of this study hint that a characteristically internal cognitive style of self-reflection and judgments of control and importance may be critical to understanding the nature of the relationship between explanatory style and procrastination.

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