



Clarifying the perfectionism–procrastination relationship using a 7-day, 14-occasion daily diary study



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ABSTRACT

Perfectionistic concerns are putative risk factors for procrastination. Even so, rigorously tested models explaining why perfectionistic concerns result in procrastination are scarce. To address this our study proposed, tested, and supported a model explaining why perfectionistic concerns give rise to procrastination. This model posits perfectionistic concerns generate discrepancies (a subjective sense of falling short of one's own standards), which in turn trigger procrastination. Undergraduates ($N = 317$) completed measures of perfectionism. The following day, participants completed online questionnaires measuring discrepancies and procrastination, twice a day, for seven consecutive days. Model predictions were supported. Perfectionistic concerns had a moderate positive association with procrastination. Tests of mediation suggested perfectionistic concerns contributed to procrastination through discrepancies. And results supported the incremental validity of our model beyond perfectionistic strivings. Findings lend credence to theoretical accounts suggesting perfectionistic concerns generate a persistent paralytic gap between the actual and the ideal self that contributes to procrastinatory behavior.

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1. Introduction

Procrastination is a voluntary delay of an intended course of action, despite expecting to be worse-off for the delay (Steel, 2007). Given that procrastination is linked to poor grades, time wasting, self-handicapping, negative life events, and psychological distress, researchers are increasingly interested in testing explanatory models to inform prevention and intervention efforts (e.g., Flett, Blankstein, & Martin, 1995; Steel & Ferrari, 2013). Consistent with calls to improve understanding of why people procrastinate, we used a daily diary design, in conjunction with multilevel structural equation modeling, to test the perfectionism–procrastination link, which we posit hinges on a subjective sense of falling short of one's own standards (i.e., discrepancies).

1.1. Perfectionism and procrastination

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high standards for performance accompanied by overly critical evaluations of one's behavior (Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Extensive evidence

suggests two higher-order factors underlie and account for shared variance among lower-order perfectionism dimensions: perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Perfectionistic strivings encompass a family of traits incorporating the tendency to demand perfection of oneself (self-oriented perfectionism; Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and the propensity to hold unrealistically high personal expectations (personal standards; Frost et al., 1990). Perfectionistic concerns comprise a constellation of traits involving the tendency to perceive others as demanding perfection (socially prescribed perfectionism; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), have overly negative reactions to perceived failures (concerns over mistakes; Frost et al., 1990), and doubts about performance abilities (doubts about actions; Frost et al., 1990).

The contention that perfectionism and procrastination go hand in hand is longstanding and widespread (e.g., Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2011). In fact, some consider procrastination to be quintessential to perfectionism. Perfectionism has, for instance, been defined as the tendency to irrationally delay tasks that should be completed (Lay, 1986). Moreover, many perfectionism measures, such as Frost et al.'s (1990) Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, contain items related to dilatory behavior (e.g., "I tend to get behind on my work because I repeat things over and over"). Likewise, perfectionism and procrastination share certain characteristics such as irrational beliefs and excessive fear of failure (Flett et al., 1995).

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Several cross-sectional studies have investigated perfectionism and procrastination. In general, traits subsumed under perfectionistic strivings (self-oriented perfectionism and personal standards) show negative relationships with procrastination (e.g., Flett et al., 1995; Uzun Ozer, O'Callaghan, Bokszczanin, Ederer, & Essau, 2014). Conversely, traits subsumed under perfectionistic concerns (socially prescribed perfectionism, concern over mistakes, doubts about actions) show positive relationships with procrastination (Flett et al., 1995; Mushquash & Sherry, 2012; Sherry, Stoeber, & Ramasubbu, 2016). Nonetheless, as Steel (2007) noted, the perfectionism-procrastination link is far from robust. We contend this stems from research that neglects perfectionism's two higher-order factors and overlooks the complex nature of procrastination as composed of both stable trait-like elements and dynamic state-like processes.

1.2. Perfectionistic concerns and discrepancies

Perfectionistic concerns appear to give rise to harsh, negative self-interpretations (e.g., Mushquash & Sherry, 2012; Sherry & Hall, 2009). In fact, perfectionistic concerns set people up to chronically be disapproving of and dissatisfied with the self. Such interpretations—which we call discrepancies—appear to be a prototypic form of self-evaluation for people high in perfectionistic concerns. Our study thus aligns with a long tradition of theory and research noting people high in perfectionistic concerns are prone to believing they have fallen short of their own standards (Horney, 1950; Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). Additionally, although discrepancies overlap with perfectionistic concerns, prior research reports discrepancies are neither redundant with nor fully captured by perfectionistic concerns (Sherry et al., 2016).

1.3. Discrepancies and procrastination

Individuals with high discrepancies are more likely to procrastinate (Flett, Stainton, Hewitt, Sherry, & Lay, 2012; Orellana-Damacela, Tindale, & Suarez-Balcazar, 2000; Rice, Richardson, & Clark, 2012). And discrepancies may be demotivating in ways that trigger procrastination (Steel, 2007). Not everyone will rise to the challenge and vigorously pursue their goals when they sense they are failing. In fact, to some, the gap between the actual and the ideal self may be experienced as irreducible. This chronic form of discrepancy may result in a sense of helplessness and hopelessness that is paralytic. Discrepancies may also be aversive in ways that trigger procrastination. Active contemplation of gaps between the actual and the ideal self is unpleasant (Orellana-Damacela et al., 2000). And procrastination may provide a means of escaping an unpleasant sense of self-awareness, and by doing so temporarily relieve distress (Steel, 2007; Tice & Baumeister, 1997).

1.4. Limitations of existing studies

Extant research on perfectionism and procrastination has several notable limitations. First, most studies on the perfectionism-procrastination link (cf. Rice et al., 2012) use cross-sectional designs, and the majority of these studies test mediational models. This is problematic, as cross-sectional designs measure variables concurrently, which render tests of mediation illusory (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). Surprisingly, true mediational analyses of the perfectionism-procrastination link, in which perfectionism and procrastination are measured at separate time points, are scarce. Accordingly, factors that might explain why certain perfectionism dimensions are risk factors for procrastination remain unclear and require explication. Our model was posited as a conceptual framework capable of filling this void.

Second, although studies have investigated the link between lower-order perfectionism dimensions and procrastination (Flett, Blankstein, Hewitt, & Koledin, 1992; Flett et al., 1995; Mushquash & Sherry, 2012; Sherry et al., 2016; Uzun Ozer et al., 2014), the relationship between

higher-order perfectionism factors and procrastination remains to be determined. Third, while some (Egan et al., 2011) advise researchers to focus on models in which discrepancies are paramount, the role of discrepancies in the perfectionism-procrastination link remains unclear and understudied. Fourth, while the trait approach to discrepancies and procrastination predominates, there is ample evidence that situation-specific discrepancies and procrastination merits greater attention (Pychyl, Lee, Thibodeau, & Blunt, 2000; Sherry, Mackinnon, Macneil, & Fitzpatrick, 2013; Steel, 2007; Steel & Ferrari, 2013). Despite this, to date, investigations on the perfectionism-procrastination link have used either cross-sectional or longitudinal designs which, in contrast to daily diary designs, are ill-suited to studying constructs with meaningful within-person variance (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). These important gaps in knowledge suggest a need for further inquiry.

1.5. The present study

Against this background, our study used multilevel structural equation modeling to evaluate whether within-person fluctuations in discrepancies are connected to within-person fluctuations in procrastination and whether between-person differences in discrepancies mediate perfectionistic concerns' relationship with procrastination. We anticipated that (a) discrepancies will increase procrastination at both within-person and between-person levels; (b) discrepancies will mediate perfectionistic concerns' relationship with procrastination; and (c) the paths predicted by our model would remain significant and largely unaltered after controlling for perfectionistic strivings. Perfectionistic strivings may suppress the relationship between perfectionistic concerns and negative outcomes (see Stoeber & Gaudreau, 2017), making perfectionistic strivings an important covariate to include when testing the impact of perfectionistic concerns on procrastination. Finally, we conducted a secondary analysis to test the assertion that perfectionism has, at best, a small association with procrastination (Rice et al., 2012; Steel, 2007; Steel & Klingsieck, 2016). In particular, we examined if such weak associations would be observed when procrastination's within-person effects are separated from its between-person effects.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 317 students (247 women) was recruited via Dalhousie's participant subject pool. Participants were compensated \$10 and awarded three credits for a psychology course mark. The mean age was 20.3 years ($SD = 4.3$). Self-reported ethnicities were 82.3% White, 5.4% Asian, 3.8% Black, 3.6% Multiracial, and 4.9% other. Most participants were in their first (49.2%) or second (35.1%) year of study.

2.2. Measures

A long-term timeframe (during the past several years) was used to measure perfectionistic concerns and strivings. A short-term timeframe (since your last entry) was used to measure discrepancies and procrastination. To reduce participant burden and to increase response rates, daily measures were shortened (see Mushquash & Sherry, 2012 for details). This approach is common in diary studies (e.g., Sherry & Hall, 2009).¹ Perfectionistic strivings, perfectionistic concerns, discrepancies, and procrastination were measured as latent variables, each with three

¹ We conducted a cross-sectional supplemental study to evaluate the psychometric properties of our modified measures. A sample of 78 students (70 female) was recruited. The mean age was 20.2 ($SD = 2.57$). This supplemental study is referenced as Sherry (2017).

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