

# Academic procrastination and perfectionism



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This focus of this dissertation is to determine the relationship between academic procrastination and perfectionism amongst university students in Mauritius. The study therefore addressed some factors that are believed to affect university students in their life as a student and play an important role on the level of academic achievement.

This chapter will serve its introductory purpose by defining the key terms (subsection 1) that will be used throughout this dissertation so as to have a clearer insight of the subject going to be dealt with. It also gives a description of the problem statement (subsection 2) of the research, describes the aims and objectives of the dissertation (subsection 3) before finally giving a general overview of the dissertation (subsection 4).

## **Defining the key terms**

Procrastination is the act of putting off, deferring, prolonging, delaying, stalling or even postponing a task for a future period in time (Rosário et al., 2009). The tasks that people actually tend to put off are often ones which are considered of high priority in a person's agenda. A person can be said to be procrastinating when that individual begins to substitute tasks of higher importance with others that are actually of lower priority or are of no particular importance. Procrastination is a word that generally has a pejorative connotation and it is usually considered as an undesirable act. Indeed, one of the most famous quotes on the undesirability of the act of procrastinating, reprised by even the former president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson (Jefferson, 2005), comes from the Earl of Chesterfield in his letter to his son:

“ No idleness, no laziness, no procrastination; never put off till to-morrow what you can do today” (Stanhope, 2004).

Nevertheless, procrastination has permeated the life of all individuals at some point in their life. According to the findings of Schouwenburg and Dewitte (Schouwenburg and Dewitte, 2002) from time to time everyone procrastinates, but the one who has an inclination to procrastinate more than others can be termed as a procrastinator. Procrastinators are found everywhere around us, but one field where its presence can be especially felt is in the academic field, that is an area which concerns formal education. Some studies have demonstrated that academic procrastination was present in the acts of 70% of University students (Rosário et al., 2009).

The general idea about procrastination is that it causes underperformance; a direct consequence of getting a delayed start on the work due is that one does not have adequate time to complete the work at the best level (Schouwenburg and Dewitte, 2002). The same reasoning can be applied to the procrastinators of the scholarly field; students procrastinate, lose time and the remaining time to complete the work is insufficient resulting eventually in lower standard of the work that would have been expected from them. The procrastinators of the academic field may cause perplexity as one may wonder why they repeat these undesirable tasks of putting off tasks if such actions on their part result in poor performance.

On the other hand, the term perfectionism can be construed as the disposition of a person to impose a high standard, that is, a demand of flawless execution of a performance and to achieve superiority in that

performance (Flett and Hewitt, 2002). Attempting to always do something to one's highest degree of proficiency, that is, seeking perfection in one's action may not always have positive aspects as findings have demonstrated (Slaney et al., 2001);(Stumpf and Parker, 2000). The positive aspect of perfectionism has been termed as adaptive perfectionism while the side of the construct which carries negative aspects has been termed as maladaptive perfectionism (Chang, Watkins and Banks, 2004); (Dunn, Whelton and Sharpe, 2006).

What differentiates between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism is that while both types of perfectionists set exceedingly high standard for their work, the way they respond is fundamentally different. The adaptive perfectionist does set goals which are probably of the highest degree of excellence, but if he fails to meet the desired self- imposed standard, he experiences a relatively low level of distress. On the other, the maladaptive perfectionist if failing to achieve the preferred norms experiences a much higher level of distress than his counterpart.

Some studies have found that the adaptive type of ' perfectionism', which has been termed as adaptive perfectionism, could become a cause for motivation in people striving to succeed in their endeavours (Hewitt and Flett, 1991). This proposition was supported by further research which demonstrated that these individuals were not only more motivated, but also more likely to succeed (Frost et al., 1990). However, maladaptive perfectionism, on the other hand is believed to be give be linked to negative behaviours like self-criticism and procrastination.

## **1. 2 The problem statement**

The previously stated definitions now bring us into the context of this dissertation. The terms procrastination, academic procrastination as well as perfectionism have been defined and the relationship between these concepts will now be studied. These terms will be applied to the Mauritian context, more specifically to the university students of Mauritius. This study will therefore show that there is academic procrastination present among the latter category of student population. The study on procrastination will be narrowed down and be studied through the perspective of how far this problem is related to perfectionism: This dissertation will be focused on determining the relationship between academic procrastination and perfectionism amongst university students in Mauritius.

## **1. 3 Aims and objectives of the dissertation**

This dissertation aims at establishing that academic procrastination is much present among students in Mauritius in their individual cognitive learning styles; more specifically, on whether such negative acts are carried out on a widespread basis at the level of university students in Mauritius. This dissertation also aims to examine the previously mentioned hypothesis that there is a link between procrastination and perfectionism, more specifically maladaptive perfectionism. If such a correlation is established, the exact nature and extent of such a relationship will be studied and how this correlation plays a role in cognitive learning, motivational factors and affective situation of university students as they go through the various steps in trying to obtain their scholarly qualifications.

To establish such a relationship, the objectives of this study will be to firstly, to prove through primary and secondary sources that academic procrastination exists among university students and, in fact, students who indulge in procrastination, on a regular basis, are very high in number in Mauritius. Secondly, the different motivational factors that make students want to achieve superiority in a performance as well as completing the tasks on time will be studied in a view of determining how far perfectionism play a role in academic tasks carried out by students. Thirdly, a possible correlation between doing tasks which qualify as academic procrastination and perfectionist criteria set by students will be examined.

## **1. 4 Overview of the dissertation**

To achieve the above set out aims and objectives of this dissertation, the different school of thoughts on the subject of procrastination, perfectionism and procrastination linked to perfectionism will be analysed; that is, a review of literature will be carried out in the Chapter 2. An elaboration on the strategies and research methodology implemented in this dissertation as well as an analysis of the strength and weaknesses of the various methods used will follow in the Chapter 3. The Chapter 4 of this dissertation will analyse the data collected from primary and secondary sources used and these results will be further discussed in Chapter 5 of the dissertation. Finally, conclusions will be drawn from the analysis performed throughout this dissertation and recommendations will be formulated in the last chapter of this dissertation: Conclusions and Recommendations.

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Chapter 2: Review of Literature

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## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

Procrastination is an act that has interested researchers since a very time and perfectionism has also been subject to considerable number of reviews, being an area of interest in the field of psychology. The appreciation of discussions and reviews of different authors that have made their positions clear the topics may in turn give a clearer picture of a possible correlation between perfectionism and Academic procrastination. The review of literature in this chapter will therefore include the different school of thoughts on the subject of procrastination, perfectionism and procrastination linked to perfectionism.

It is in this optic that the aetiology of procrastination (subsection 1) needs to be examined, followed by an analysis of the specific factor of perfectionism as a cause of procrastination (subsection 2) and finally the link between perfectionism and academic procrastination (subsection 3) will be studied.

### **2. 1 The aetiology of procrastination**

The etymology of the word ‘ procrastination’ is of latin provenance; it derives from the term ‘ procrastinare’ which in turn has its roots in pro, meaning “ forward” and crastinus, meaning “ of tomorrow” (Klein, 1971).

Procrastination is a term that has been often referred to in literature of various genres including historical, religious literary works.

On odd occasion, some authors have used the term procrastination in a positive light designating it as a sort of purposeful delay that may counterbalance the tendency to rush into the work impetuously at the risk of neglecting some more important aspects or missing some information of

higher importance that would have come later if the work had been delayed. One of such works that vindicate the use of procrastination as playing a somewhat useful role states that:

“ Hamlet had it wrong: he who hesitates is halfway home.” (Bernstein, 1998)

However, it is undeniable that most of those who have tried to carry out in depth research on the subject of procrastination have found that procrastination carries many drawbacks, dwarfing by far more the functional delay that authors like Bernstein have described. An analysis on the subject of procrastination carried out by Milgram (1992) attributed this course of (in)action to the industrial revolution more precisely to the fact that technical advancement in the rapidly changing society gave rise to new deadlines for people which was not present in agrarian society. The same view was supported by Ferrari, Johnson and McCown in their book, although they took a less firm stand on this position by stating that despite existing throughout history, it was not before the Industrial Revolution that the problem’s amplitude was magnified. (Ferrari, Johnson and McCown, 1995).

Showing their agreement to much extent with the previously stated position, others have even gone on to term procrastination as a contemporary form of “ malady” touching people (Kachgal, Hansen and Nutter, 2001) . However, despite Kachgal et al.’s respective positions on this subject the ‘ problem’ of procrastination has long existed and been documented in society.

Among various examples of these instances of documentation of procrastination in society, even before the Industrial Revolution we may find the Earl of Chesterfield’s letter to his son where he mentions procrastination  
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(Stanhope, 2004) or even in the sermon of Reverends preceding the era such as Reverend Walker's speech on where he considers procrastination as being a very sinful course of action (Walker, 1682). Even some of the classical texts are fraught with references on the subject of procrastination for example, Cicero, a very famous Roman Orator, in a diatribe against Mark Antony, condemned him for his sluggishness and filled with procrastination manner (Philippics, 6. 7). Eastern works such as the Bhagavad Gita (Gandhi, Strohmeier and Nagler, 2000) provides a further insight on how far back references to the subject are present as the book dates 500 BC. In the book Lord Krishna states that considers the "Tamasika", that is, people of abominable character are those who indulge in certain types of behaviour including procrastination. These people, according to him, are denied rebirth in a mortal form and are sent straight to hell.

From the evidence that have been gathered from various sources, it may be concluded that procrastination has existed since long in human behaviour. Some researchers have tried to probe further in the question by trying to find out how far present procrastination is present in human nature. Such a study has been carried out by Elliot. The latter tried to question several aspects of procrastination as a personality human trait among which he tried to probe on how consistent procrastination was in individuals. Elliot tried to retest people who had participated in an Adult inventory of Procrastination after ten years had elapsed since the test and found that that procrastination was still much present in these individuals thus showing it as a stable trait in them (Elliot, 2002).

## **2. 1. 1 The causes of procrastination**

Furthermore, many scholars have held different positions on what they consider and the causes and/or correlates of procrastination. One school of thought on the matter is that individuals have the free will to make conscious choices when facing certain tasks and therefore people sometimes make the irrational choice of procrastinating when faced with tasks. Briody (1980) carried out a study to prove this theory and he found that that the rate of procrastination when applied to certain distinctive undertaking characteristic was of 50% in people on whom survey was carried out. Two recurring factors, related to the environment of people, were suggested as playing an important role in these tasks: Firstly, The reinforcement of sanction period, that is reward or punishment to be attributed for the tasks and secondly, the degree of averseness that the tasks carried.

The first predictable factor observed, to be precise, the timing of rewards for punishment is a factor that has been long established and accepted: The further the period of reward or sanction is the less likely it is to impact on a person's immediate decisions (Lewin, 1935). There has been sufficient evidence on this subject to place it among the laws of learning in the subject of psychology (Schwartz, 1989). As regards to the second factor, that is, the averseness present in the tasks which is in itself a self-explanatory term has been also called 'dysphoric' effect. (Milgram, Sroloff and Rosenbaum, 1988). This line of thinking follows what Freud has termed as pleasure Principle where one prefers to do tasks that one finds enjoyable and delays for as far as possible less enjoyable tasks. Other such causes like mood and extraversion attributed by various people are diverse and ranging from

behavioural causes, cognitive and emotional responses. However, a recurring cause when studying procrastination is ‘perfectionism’.

## **2. 2 Perfectionism as a cause of procrastination.**

Perfectionism, that is the demand of flawless execution (Flett and Hewitt, 2002), is also a term that has conjured much interest. There are various definitions and conceptualisations of perfectionism, with the generally accepted view that there is a positive and negative aspect of perfectionism. In fact, it is because perfectionism is often linked with a variety of psychological troubles and emotional distress that it has been subject to so much attention in the field of psychology (Walsh and Ugumba-Agwunobi, 2002); However, of particular interest to the current study, the literature review on the subject of perfectionism will be mostly focused on the adaptive and maladaptive category of perfectionism.

As has been stated in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, many have chosen fit to divide perfectionism between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism (Chang, Watkins and Banks, 2004), (Dunn, Whelton and Sharpe, 2006). While adaptive perfectionism has been considered as influencing people’s positively such as causing employees with a higher level of perfectionism to also have a higher level of Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) (Beauregard, 2012). Slaney et al even found that adaptive perfectionists in fact procrastinated less than people who barely had any perfectionist standards (Slaney et al., 2001).

Psychologists generally believe that the negative aspect of perfectionism, labelled as maladaptive perfectionism is like a variable in a person’s

personality that causes considerable psychological difficulties for that person (Bieling, Israeli and Antony, 2004). Some have gone as far as pointing out the irony of there being an imperfect aspect of perfectionism (Fields, 2011). Maladaptive perfectionism exists in contrast to adaptive perfectionism. Bieling et al carried out a study and their study showed sufficient evidence to support a distinction between the two types of perfectionism. They found that the maladaptive perfectionists tend to experience much higher distress when they fail to meet their self-imposed rigid standards of flawless execution. Among the various adverse psychological effects that Bieling et al have been attributed to this 'unhealthy' perfectionism are stress, anxiety, depression and most importantly, procrastination.

The perfectionist, as opposed to a healthy achiever, has also been defined as having the following characteristics: (1) A complete feeling of satisfaction with the work done is never achieved, (2) Standards set are set higher than what would be considered as attainable (3) The perfectionism cannot deal with criticism, (4) mistakes diminishes his sense of self-worth, (5) the perfectionist becomes defensive or over emotional when confronted with his mistakes and finally (6) constantly worries about being up to the standards of that he believes is expected (Gould, 2012).

The above listed traits include many traits of cognitive dissonance. The cognitive dissonances may manifest itself in the form of fear of failure, high anxiety level as well as negative social behaviour. This form of dissonance in turn often leads to procrastination. This association has often been found made (Burka and Yuen, 1983) (Flett, Hewitt and Martin, 1995) (Hamachek, 1978) (Pacht, 1984). This line of thinking is again consistent with the '  
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pleasure principle' described by Freud; one wants to carry out tasks which are pleasant first while the tasks which consciously or unconsciously cause emotional distress are put off for as long as is possible (Freud, 1959).

The early studies on the subject always found evidence that such a perfectionism-driven procrastination existed. However, it is to be pointed out that the relationship between perfectionism has not been described as a simple one (Flett et al, 1995). Flett, Hewitt and Martin have suggested that the relationship is a very deep one and is made up of various layers; the multi-dimension consisting of a dimension related to the self and also an others-oriented perfectionism dimension as well as social ones where one expects perfectionism from others around him. To reach these, conclusion the sample of people surveyed were all undergraduates and graduate students as Flett et al. found the correlation between procrastination and perfectionism specifically prominent in the academic field.

### **2. 3 The link between perfectionism and academic procrastination**

Academic procrastination is a mere subheading under the vast forms that procrastination may take and the subject has been widely researched as it concerns a problem that seems to touch a many number of students. Many studies have demonstrated that academic procrastination exists up to a very high percentage of university students (Rosário et al., 2009).

From what can be derived on subject of procrastination, it has found and asserted that the higher the irrational thinking in individuals also increases the rate of Academic procrastination in undergraduates (Bridges and Roig,

1997). On the other hand, Beswick et al. (1988), Klassen et al. (2007) and Tuckman (1990), were of the opinion that it was due to a problem of low self-esteem present in some undergraduates that the latter had a tendency to procrastinate (Sirin, 2011). Many other causes of procrastination have been researched in the academic field: While McKean (1990, 1994) attributed procrastination in undergraduates to the learned helplessness, Milgram et al. (1995) attributed same rather to inefficient time management. Burns et al. (2000) and Onwuegbuzie (2004) believed procrastination was more of an avoidance defence mechanism. The conclusion was finally reached by Solomon and Rothblum (1984), Schouwenburg (1992) and Onwuegbuzie (2004) that it was a certain level of fear of failure that caused students to procrastinate.

However, many others like Flett et al. (1995), Capan (2010), Busko (1998), Seo (2008), Saddler and Sacks (1993), Park and Kwon (1998), were of the opinion that academic procrastination, in fact, had a close link with perfectionism. Nevertheless, it is to be stressed that these relation vary depending on the type of perfectionist the students are. While there is a causal relationship between perfectionism and academic procrastination, where the type of perfectionism is of the maladaptive kind, it is interesting to note that where the perfectionism was of the adaptive type, the link was still present, but in an inverse nature, with the higher the rate of perfectionism, the less likely the students were to procrastinate (Sirin, 2011).

From what has been reviewed the conclusion can be reached that perfectionism is now considered as a leading source of trouble in undergraduate and graduate students even if there exists various other

causes of procrastination. The maladaptive perfectionism causes a wide range of troubles which affect the personality as well as having a psychological effect on them. These troubles in turn may cause students to have a wide range of psychological troubles and may even lead to underachievement among students and this now leads us to wonder how pertinent this problem is to the local context.

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Chapter 3: Methodology

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter will describe the design and research methodology that was implemented to determine the relationship between procrastination and perfectionism among university students in Mauritius. The hypothesis here being that such a link exists, the aim of this chapter will therefore be to provide a clear and comprehensive picture of the different of the specific steps to be followed in order to deduct if such a link can be proved or disproved through a correlation design that might aims at establishing this link.

The steps that will be examined in this chapter therefore will be to provide a description of the research methodology used (subsection 1), an explanation of the research design (subsection 2), an elaboration on the sampling frame (subsection 3), the sampling techniques (subsection 4), research instruments design (subsection 5), the research ethics (subsection 6), the data collection (subsection 7), the data analysis (subsection 8) and finally the limitations of the study (subsection 8).

### **3. 1 Description of the research methodology used**

For the research methodology of this dissertation a quantitative approach was favoured. The quantitative research comprises of