

A THEMATIC REVIEW ON THE PERFECTIONISM-PROCRASTINATION CYCLE IN HIGH-ACHIEVERS



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A Thematic Review On The Perfectionism-Procrastination Cycle in high-Achievers

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between perfectionism and procrastination and their combined effects on students, especially in high-achievers, is a major concern in academic fields. Research on similar topics and queries aims to study the stress and coping mechanisms these scholars might develop, and the mental health issues that are arising in the present day. It is necessary to explore the meaning behind such terms in depth, and their practical results in academic and work-related places, exploring the areas that have been neglected in past studies such as, how maladaptive perfectionism leads to procrastination, typically in high-performing individuals who find it troublesome to reach the exact result they are aiming for, and how these traits can be observed.

Using several resources, such as Peer Reviewed Journals, Meta Analyses and Empirical Evidences, dating back to early 20th century findings and theories about psychoanalytic or cognitive behaviour to the very recent studies of 2024, this review paper aims to direct a clear view towards explaining how delay in initiation towards tasks might be linked to perfectionism in individuals within academic fields, taking in consideration the contextual and cultural background, such as family expectations, competition among peers, and societal views, etc.

Keywords: Perfectionism, Procrastination, High-Achieving Students, Academic Stress, Fear of Failure, Delay in Actions

INTRODUCTION

In academic community, expectations from students or scholars stem from an excessive pressure for needing to succeed in hyper-competitive environments. This pushes the students to gather a sense of anxiety and fear, where they are exasperated to accept negative emotions and feel overwhelmed by the demands. The fear of failure and not being able to stay consistent or struggling to achieve perfectionism with task activities leads to mental fatigue and burnout, driving them towards procrastination.

Perfectionism can be described as the tendency to set standards, often quite high, and continuously being concerned with trying to achieve that certain level of flawlessness. It can be based on critical self-evaluation or evaluation made by others. Students often refuse to accept shortcomings, being their own biggest critic, and experience distress about proving their self-worth. It is an internal drive that leads the person to create a self-evaluation discovery based on their own concept, or as defined by others. This persistent need to achieve flawlessness can have either positive outcomes, or negative.

Procrastination is the act of delaying a task until the very last moment, either because one doesn't feel like doing it at their earliest convenience or cannot find motivation to start with. It is something that can be very commonly addressed in students, usually coming as a response towards confusion and stress. They find it difficult to start on their work assignments, projects, or preparing for exams, often due to not understanding the material or the fear of being unable to do it "perfectly".

This creates a perpetual and strenuous cycle, where stress or pressure leads to delayed actions, which ends up gathering more agitation as a result. Students find it burdensome to keep up with the deadlines, unable to figure out the right time to start and staying invariable with their tasks, which donates a reason to question their self-worth and abilities. High-Achievers, who are heavily concerned with striving for perfection are pressured by a constant fear of failure or of being harshly judged, finding themselves more prone to procrastination.

Purpose & Importance:

This review aims to analyse and explore how perfectionism contributes to procrastination in high-achieving students.

Understanding the link between these two is essential to bring awareness towards the psychological mechanisms through which students respond to academic pressure. As competition is at a constant growth rate and academic burnout and anxiety in students are vital arguments that can be noted, it is crucial to study and grasp such factors to develop better education strategies and enhance the mental health of students.

SCOPE:

- **Time Period:**

This review paper aims to cover the studies tracing back to the early 20th-century theories to contemporary findings of 2024, examining the relationship between procrastination and perfectionism and their related effects on academic field, as well as emphasising on growing mental health issues among students and professionals.

- **Databases Searched:**

For the conduction of this paper, several academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, etc, were searched to gather an amount of credible and valid peer-reviewed studies, meta-analyses, empirical researchers and research papers, as well as book chapters, to find out the likings between perfectionism-procrastination, student performance and mental health.

Maladaptive Perfectionism and Fear of Failure:

Maladaptive Perfectionism is a form of perfectionism where a person sets up highly unrealistic standards, and goals which are difficult to achieve. They find it hard to accept the mistakes they have made when met with setbacks, and struggle to cope with the negative outcomes of those, such

as anxiety, depression and excessive disappointment. They suffer from experiencing immoderate negative emotions like shame, guilt, and unworthiness, which also affects their relationship with peers, friends, family and others. They tend to highly criticize themselves, nitpicking the smallest of affairs and are unable to feel satisfied with what they have achieved so far. When faced with difficult circumstances, they are not flexible enough to mould their standards accordingly, finding it difficult to bounce back from the afflictions and feeling content for any of the accomplishments they have made.

A student may start having impractical standards and expectations from oneself, and become inclined to critical self-evaluation and struggle to cope with stress and frustration when they're unable to achieve their precise standards and goals flawlessly. They might also start having the belief that society and others are holding very high expectations from them; and they might get harshly judged and reprimanded, if they fail to meet the set standards. This might be an actual understanding, or develop as fear of failing others leading to suffering with low self-value, negative self-esteem and anxiety.

Academic Procrastination and Behavioural Patterns:

Academic procrastination refers to the persistent behaviour of students postponing tasks, hindering their performance and academic growth. Students often find themselves holding up the assignments or work they've been assigned, either finishing them at the last moment or struggling to complete them by the given deadline, even while being aware of the negative consequences it might have. This causes drop in grades, increased stress and anxiety levels, low self-esteem, and negative effects on well-being. The reasons to delay tasks might vary, such as having trouble understanding the material, fear of failure, doubting one's abilities, lack of motivation, poor self-regulation and even perfectionism which causes avoidance behaviour.

A few studies suggest that perfectionism in students may also push out certain behavioural patterns on the surface, like procrastination, avoidance, constant checking and reassuring, feeling on edge, excessive organisation, indecisiveness, unable to find a time to start or when to stop, etc. (Flett & Hewitt, 1991)

Certain outward behavioural tendencies can be discovered in procrastinators, which are consciously or unconsciously consistent.

- **Needless Delay:** Students may find tasks too boring or unpleasant to get started. This may instigate them to give more importance to tasks that aren't urgent or should be low-prioritized.
- **Prone to Distraction:** It is easy for them to get distracted and have their focus attached to something else while working. Examples can be- constantly checking phone, text messages, social media, and giving into seeking entertainment. They might also mistake “activity” for “productivity”.
- **Feeling of Guilt:** Scholars start to heavily criticize themselves, feeling bad or shameful for delaying tasks, and believing that “I can never do this properly.” This causes the negative feelings to push back down the motivation to start working on tasks.

- Last-Minute Rush: Some people believe they work best under pressure and deliberately delay tasks and wait for the deadline to come close so the pressure would lead them to get started.
- Avoidance of Evaluation: The fear of getting judged and rejected can also contribute to procrastinating, believing that “If I never start, I can never fail.”
- Low Self-Efficacy: It refers to constantly doubting one's own capabilities, and fearing to not being able to work on the given tasks in a proper manner.

Linkage between Procrastination and Perfectionism:

In older researchers, the concept of perfectionism and procrastination were usually studied separately to get a deeper understanding of each. There is little connection explained between these two, and procrastination is simply defined as a direct product of striving for perfection. However, taking in the contemporary researches, we can see that it is a complex and multilayered link, and both perfectionism and procrastination are traits or behaviour that influence each other subsequently.

Other than these two terms, a few arrangements are also often related and studied in similar findings, such as “working disorder”, “work disruption”, “writer’s block”, etc to deeply analyse the effect perfectionism might have on individuals, leading them to procrastinate more often. (Steinert et al., 2021)

Correlation between the two based on Empirical Findings:

Perfectionistic concerns can have both positive and negative correlation with procrastination. Some findings suggest that the fear of failure and doubts in one's own capabilities may lead to an individual delaying tasks, showing avoidance behaviour. While others, especially high-achievers or high-striving students are more likely to complete tasks and work efficiently to meet their goals set by themselves. (Steinert et al., 2021)

One of the studies indicates that not all perfectionism is maladaptive but are more closely related to psychological distress, leading to avoidance behaviour. Consistent with the study of Frost et al. (1990) it was found that it is mostly socially-prescribed perfectionism (perceived external standards from family, workplace, etc.) that leads to high levels of procrastination. Academic procrastination is often seen linked with high expectations and criticism from parents towards the child, leading them to show avoidance behaviour. This shows that students don't delay tasks due to feeling lazy or rebelling, but often because they fear getting judged and not meeting the standards set for them. (Flett et al., 1992)

In a study done by Sirois, Molnar, and Hirsch (2017), where the relation of procrastination with perfectionism was studied, divided in two sections One as, perfectionistic concern, where a person is constantly worried about failure, and standards set by others, which results in them delaying tasks because they are afraid of not doing them perfectly according to the expectations others have from them, and the other one perfectionistic striving, where a person sets up goals and expectations

from themselves in accordance to their abilities, and are less likely to procrastinate as they are trying to follow the schedule they have set for themselves.

A few researchers show that high-achieving students are more prone to maladaptive perfectionism, hence more likely to procrastinate. However, this is mostly the case for the students who hold low self-efficacy, doubting their abilities and skills but not a dire case for students with high self-efficacy. Unable to meet the standards being set up for oneself can lead to reduced self-esteem and self-efficacy, which increases the feeling of discrepancy between standards and outcomes. (Kurtovic, Vrdoljak, and Idzanovic, 2019)

Academic and Parental Pressure:

High-Achieving students are more prone to maladaptive perfectionism, as they often internalize expectations, hence more likely to procrastinate. As they've been brought down with standards, usually by others – like, family, peers, teachers, etc. they find it troublesome to figure out the difference between their own goals and the goals set by others. Cultural and institutional settings often play a huge role in this, as it is commonly shown that the standards set in families creates an unsafe space for students to fall back when exhausted. Students are constantly frustrated by the talks of having to pay back their elders for the efforts they are putting for their education, leading to them doubting their self-worth.

The students suffer from experiencing excessive negative emotions like remorse, humiliation, and unworthiness, which also affects their relationship with peers, family, co-workers and others. They tend to highly criticize themselves, feel unable to socialize – worrying that any of the distraction might cause them to fail. Thoughts like “I am not enough”, “I cannot do this”, “I feel tired, maybe I will do this later”, etc., are much more likely to occur, making the person who is striving to achieve something also feel laidback. (Sirois, Molnar, and Hirsch, 2017)

However, this leads to them feeling more guilty and shameful when they deliberately ignore their tasks, which contributes to procrastinating even more and eventually suffering with negative consequences. By critical self-evaluation, they start to doubt their own skills and fail to figure out the time to start, or keep putting it off, waiting for the perfect time to appear. Being afraid of getting judged by others is a major factor in making one procrastinate, as they believe that if they never start, they will never fail and will not get judged. Besides this, the sense of internal pressure that comes from the belief that others are holding one in high regard and to be accepted among others, their performance has to be perfect and should be in accordance to satisfying everyone – mostly parents and professors.

Personality Traits Commonly Found in Research:

- 1) **Maladaptive Perfectionism:** Students often feel inadequate and little satisfied with their performance expecting high performance with themselves, often ending up in a spiral of self-

criticism, fear of failure and worrying about mistakes they might make. (Boone, Soenens, Braet, & Goossens, 2010; Rice & Ashby, 2007)

- 2) Neuroticism: When it comes to dealing with stress, anxiety, anger or other negative feelings, high-achievers often tend to struggle with managing their emotions, either leaning towards task avoidance or repeating the same workload, striving for extreme perfectionism due to the fear of not meeting standards.
- 3) Conscientiousness: Often seemed as a positive trait the tendency of being responsible, organizational and having good self-control might be perceived as positive before it turns into an obsession, or a habitual over-preparation.
- 4) Imposter Syndrome: Stemming from maladaptive perfectionism, imposter syndrome may make it difficult to perceive the difference between prospects of failure and actual failure, giving rise to poor self-reflections, self-doubts and insecurities. (Yosopov et al., 2024)

DISCUSSION

This review investigated perfectionism, surveying its maladaptive dimensions and how it correlates to procrastination in high-achievers searching for common observable personality traits and behavioural patterns they may exhibit. Across the literature studied, academic and parental expectations linked with internalized pressure appeared as one of the central mechanisms.

For a summarized insight, fear of failure, imperfections and disappointing oneself or others often lead to poor management, organization and avoidance behaviour. This creates an opening to the feeling of guilt and self-doubts, resulting into a cycle: Need for Perfectionism > Fear of not being able to achieve it > Avoidance of task, or failing to figure out when and how to start (often over-preparing) > Failing to produce expected results > Feeling of Guilt and Disappointment > To overcome, an overwhelming urge surfaces to carry out perfectionistic demands

Models or Theories Mentioned:

- Cognitive Behavioural Model (Aaron Beck, 1960-70): It explains the interconnection between thoughts, feelings and emotions, and their influence on each other. Here, it was used to unpack the relation between maladaptive thoughts and avoidance behaviour.
- Psychodynamic Model (Freud, 1890-1930): This model talks about unconscious thoughts, drives and childhood or old experiences affecting behaviour. Here, it gives a hand in explaining inner conflict, defence mechanisms, and parental influence.
- The Tripartite Model of Perfectionism (Frost et al., 1990): It breaks perfectionism into three branches, self-oriented (personal standards), other-oriented (expecting perfectionistic tendencies from others), and socially-prescribed (believing that others expect perfectionism from yourself). Here, it explains how students feel pressured from the inner standards and expectations from others.
- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985): It focuses on autonomy, competence and relatedness. Here, it explains the struggle of students with autonomy, leading to strive for perfectionism and approval from others, eventually ending in burnout and procrastination.

Models or theories recommended:

- Temporal Motivation Theory (Steel & König, 2006) : It explains procrastination in terms of expectancy, impulsivity, and perfectionism tied to identity. Here, it can be used to analyse the reasons behind delayed actions in perfectionistic students.
- Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) : It runs on the idea that when the limit of working memory is crossed, performance drops naturally. Here, it might give perspective to complexity of tasks, or poor instructions given, spiking a problem for students by adding extra load of efforts in only the initial stage of task execution, leading to decline in the later phases.

CONCLUSION

Perfectionism is closely linked with procrastination, particularly maladaptive perfectionism where a person sets up unrealistic and hard-to-achieve standards for themselves. This can be observed as a prevalent trait in high-achievers, often internalizing pressure either due to poor self-reflection, or expectations surrounding through parents and their environment. This self-defeating cycle enhances negative emotions, such as self-doubt, fear of failure, extreme guilt, etc., leading to avoidance or delay in task executions and guide to certain personality traits such a neuroticism, conscientiousness and imposter syndrome.

By inspecting theories and models such as Cognitive Behavioural Model, Psychodynamic Model, The Tripartite Model of Perfectionism, and Self-Determination Theory, themes of maladaptive perfectionism, academic procrastination, internalized pressure and avoidance behaviour were given clear insights. Addressing such gave a transparent view that lacking skills in time management, self-regulation and organization might not be incompetency but a sign of defence mechanism prevailing for deeper, unconscious conflicts.

This highlights the need for academic support and emotional validity from parents/peers, for better academic performance of students. Further research can be done by taking Temporal Motivation Theory, Cognitive Load Theory, and similar models to take in a different perspective than just environmental and psychological factors for perfectionism-procrastination cycle examining the complexity of academic tasks and instructions, along with motivation in scholars.

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