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Start Today or the Very Last Day?

The Relationships Among Self-Compassion, Motivation, and Procrastination

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ABSTRACT

College students differ in their approaches to challenging course assignments. While some prefer to begin their assignments early, others postpone their work until the last minute. The present study adds to the procrastination literature by examining the links among self-compassionate attitudes, motivation, and procrastination tendency. A sample of college undergraduates completed four online surveys. Individuals with low, moderate, and high levels of self-compassion were compared on measures of motivation anxiety, achievement goal orientation, and procrastination tendency. Data analyses revealed that individuals with high self-compassion reported dramatically less motivation anxiety and procrastination tendency than those with low or moderate self-compassion. The practical importance of studying self-views as potential triggers for procrastination behavior and directions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The typical college course requires the successful completion of challenging assignments, such as exams, term papers, and presentations. With deadlines looming for these assignments, some students will begin their work right away, while others will wait until the last minute to get started. While research evidence does not support the utility of last-minute strategies, such as cramming for exams, students may nonetheless engage in these behaviors as a result of procrastination (Schraw, Wadkins, & Olafson, 2007; Senecal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995).

Procrastination may lead to positive outcomes, such as high grades, but for many students can be counterproductive and detrimental to achievement (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2002; Schraw et al., 2007; Senecal et al., 1995). With important and potentially negative outcomes linked to procrastination, why would a student choose to procrastinate?

Previous research has identified the possible causes for procrastination, such as fear of failure, low self-efficacy and low self-competence (Schraw et al., 2007; Senecal et al., 1995). That is, an individual who believes that he or she does not have the skills or ability to perform well may postpone work on tasks that could demonstrate these deficiencies. This strategy may not only allow the individual to postpone anxiety related to the task, but may also provide a readily available, less threatening explanation for a poor grade—that failure resulted from a lack of effort and not from a lack of ability.

Carol Dweck and colleagues have investigated the achievement goals that underlie student motivation (see Dweck & Elliot, 2005 for a review). Two prominent models of academic motivation distinguish between mastery-based and performance-based goals. An individual with a mastery-orientation seeks to learn more to fulfill personal interests and curiosity. It is an internal drive that motivates the individual to learn as much as possible and to persist through failure because failure is viewed as an opportunity to deepen one's understanding. In contrast, individuals with a performance-orientation are more externally motivated and seek to be rewarded for their ability, such as receiving higher grades than others on class assignments. Performance-oriented individuals may avoid areas where success is not guaranteed, and thus not persist when failure occurs.

On the surface, it appears that a mastery-orientation is a more adaptive motivator for achievement in that students adopt both the thirst for knowledge and the willingness to take on intellectual risks. Elliot and his colleagues (2001), however, have developed an achievement-motivation model that delineates the conditions under which mastery and performance goals are most beneficial. Performance goals may in fact work in a student's favor. For instance, a student who seeks to attain high grades may put in more time and effort on assignments, which reflects a performance-approach orientation. For another student, the motivation underlying behavior is not *toward* performing well, but to *avoid* performing poorly and the consequences to one's self-image resulting from failure. In this model, performance-avoidance goals are specifically associated with task anxiety, fear of failure, and perhaps, lower grades. Further, task-avoidant behaviors, such as procrastination, have been linked to performance-avoidance goals and academic anxiety (Tuckman, 1991, 2002).

There are also contextual causes that may affect a student's work habits and may increase the likelihood of procrastination. Students may procrastinate because they simply do not understand the assignment instructions. A student may be unsure where to begin and how to successfully complete the assignment. Another explanation for procrastination, which may prove much more difficult to remedy, are negative self-views related to achievement. For example, a student may avoid working on an assignment because of self-doubt and unpleasant emotions, such as feeling that one is not intelligent, does not belong in college, and has more trouble with their schoolwork than others. Procrastination may be viewed as a coping strategy to manage the academic stress that can negatively affect performance. Therefore, self-views may

be critical to understanding the achievement motivation-procrastination link. It is important to identify the causal factors and the correlates of procrastination in order to understand why students may engage in behaviors that may harm their academic careers.

The present study examined how self-compassion relates to achievement goals, academic motivation anxiety and trait procrastination. Self-compassion focuses on the degree to which individuals demonstrate self-kindness, connections with the experiences of others, and the ability to keep negative thoughts in mindful awareness (Neff, 2003). Perhaps individuals with high self-compassion may be better at controlling self-doubt and academic anxiety, which may prompt procrastination behavior. Neff and her colleagues have investigated the relationships between self-compassion, achievement, and psychological outcomes (Neff, 2004; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejittirat, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Among college students, self-compassion is positively related to mastery-based academic goals and negatively related to performance-based goals (Neff et al., 2005). In addition, self-compassion is negatively associated with a variety of stressors, including motivation anxiety (Neff et al., 2007). Although the relationships between self-compassion, achievement goals, and academic stress have begun to be identified, our study sought to directly connect self-compassion, achievement goals and procrastination tendency.

Specifically, the present study investigated the relationships among achievement goals, academic motivation anxiety, procrastination and self-compassion. We expected to replicate previous research that motivation anxiety is positively associated with performance-avoidance goals and procrastination. Also, we predicted that self-compassion would be positively related to mastery-goals and lower levels of anxiety. Finally, our central prediction was that self-compassion would be negatively related to procrastination tendency among college students.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 91 undergraduate students enrolled at small liberal arts university in the southwestern United States. Due to an error with the online survey instrument, demographic information was only obtained for 63 participants. Of these participants, 84% were female and the mean age was 21 years. The racial composition of the sample was as follows: 62% “European American”, 29% “Latino/Hispanic”, 5% “African American”, and 5% “Other”.

Materials and Procedures

Participants were asked to complete a set of four online surveys in exchange for course credit or an entry to a raffle drawing. Prior to viewing the surveys, participants were asked to designate gender, race/ethnicity, age, and academic major. The surveys included measures of procrastination tendency, achievement goal orientation, academic motivation anxiety, and self-compassion.

Self-Compassion. Neff’s Self-Compassion Scale (2003) was used to measure participants’ levels of self-compassion. The 26 item scale includes subscales to assess Self-Kindness (e.g. “When I’m going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need”), Common Humanity (e.g. “When things are going badly for me, I see the

difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through”), and Mindfulness (e.g. “When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation”). The response scale for each item is from 1 “Almost Never” to 5 “Almost Always”. An overall Self-Compassion score was calculated as the mean across the entire set of items. The Self-Compassion Scale has demonstrated strong internal reliability (all Cronbach’s α ’s above .70) and validity with college-aged samples (Neff, 2003).

Procrastination. To measure procrastination tendency, the 16-item Tuckman Procrastination Scale (1991) was used. Procrastination tendency was measured as overall total score, with a score range of 16 to 80. Sample items include, “When I have a deadline, I wait until the last minute,” and “I always finish important jobs with time to spare.” In previous research with traditional undergraduates, strong reliability (Cronbach α ’s = .90) was demonstrated.

Achievement Goal Orientation. Elliot and McGregor’s (2001) 12-item achievement motivation scale measures performance-approach, performance-avoidance, mastery-approach, and mastery-avoidance goals. Participants indicate the likelihood of each item on a seven-point response scale from 1 “Not at all true of me” to 7 “Very true of me”. Each subscale is measured as the mean across three items. The four subscales demonstrate strong reliability (all Cronbach α ’s > .80), (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

Academic Motivation Anxiety. Participants were asked to complete a modified version of the Motivational Trait Questionnaire-Short (MTQ-Short) (Heggstad & Kanfer, 2000). The adapted version of this questionnaire focuses on academic settings rather than work settings. Nineteen items to assess motivation anxiety, including academic-related worrying and emotionality, were included. Participants’ scores were computed as the means across the Worry subscale (e.g. “I worry how others will view my school performance”) and the Emotionality subscale (e.g. “My heart beats fast before I begin important tasks”), using a seven-point response scale from 1 “Very untrue of me” to 7 “Very true of me.” This scale demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach’s α = .88) in a previous study with college undergraduates (Williams, 2004).

RESULTS

To examine the relationships between motivation anxiety, achievement goals and procrastination tendency, a series of correlational analyses were conducted, with the alpha level set at .05 for all tests. As expected, procrastination tendency was negatively associated performance-approach goals, $r = -.21$, $p = .048$, and positively related to worry, $r = .41$, $p < .001$. Procrastination was also marginally correlated with emotionality, $r = .20$, $p = .057$. However, procrastination was not significantly related to performance-avoidance goals, $r = .04$, $p = .69$.

We predicted that self-compassion would be negatively related to motivation anxiety. The data indicated that higher levels of self-compassion were related to lower levels of worry, $r = -.45$, $p < .001$, and emotionality, $r = -.46$, $p < .001$. As shown in Table 1, each subscale of the self-compassion measure was negatively associated with both worry and emotionality.

Table 1.***Correlations Between Self-Compassion Subscales and Worry and Emotionality***

| Subscale | Worry | Emotionality |
|--------------------|-------|--------------|
| 1. Self-Kindness | -.39* | -.39* |
| 2. Mindfulness | -.51* | -.48* |
| 3. Common Humanity | -.33* | -.38* |

Note. * $p < .01$

Our primary interest for the study was whether self-compassion scores are related to achievement goals, motivation anxiety, and procrastination tendency. To examine this question, self-compassion scores were divided to create three groups: low self-compassion ($n = 30$, $M's < 2.62$), moderate self-compassion ($n = 29$, $M's < 3.12$), and high self-compassion ($n = 30$, $M's > 3.12$). The self-compassion groups were then compared on the four achievement goals variables (performance-approach, performance-avoidance, mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance), worry, emotionality, and procrastination tendency. The degrees of freedom vary by comparison because some participants failed to complete the minimum number of survey items in order to compute scale scores. Tukey's post hoc procedure was used to determine significant differences among the three self-compassion groups on the dependent variables.

First, academic-related worry differed by self-compassion level, $F(2, 86) = 9.82$, $p < .001$. Participants with high self-compassion reported significantly less academic worry ($M = 4.11$, $SD = .17$) than those with low self-compassion ($M = 5.18$, $SD = .17$), but similar levels of worry as those with moderate self-compassion ($M = 4.54$, $SD = .17$).

Second, self-compassion level was also related to emotionality, $F(2, 86) = 12.76$, $p < .001$, such that individuals with low self-compassion reported greater emotionality ($M = 4.65$, $SD = .16$) than those with moderate ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .16$) or high self-compassion ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .16$). However, those with moderate and high self-compassion did not statistically differ. Finally, contrary to our predictions, self-compassion level was unrelated to scores on the four achievement goals.

Most central to our study, reported procrastination tendency varied significantly by self-compassion level, $F(2, 86) = 5.53$, $p = .006$. As depicted in Figure 1, those with high self-compassion indicated dramatically less procrastination compared to participants with low or moderate levels of self-compassion, who did not statistically differ.

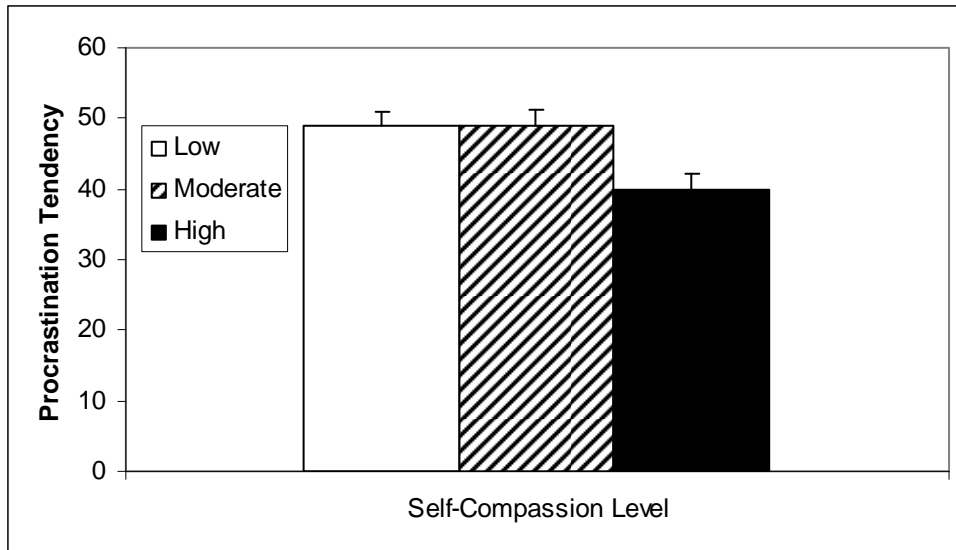


Figure 1. Mean procrastination tendency as a function of self-compassion level.

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to address the relationships among self-compassion, academic motivation and goals, motivation anxiety, and procrastination tendency. The results indicated that higher levels of self-compassion, which includes self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, were related to lower levels of academic worry and emotionality. We also expected that individuals with greater self-compassion would report less procrastination tendency, which was supported by the data. Individuals with greater self-kindness and mindfulness may be better able to manage academic worries, such as doubts about competence, and by doing so, are less apt to procrastinate. Further, because their sense of identity and worth are not contingent upon performance, these individuals may be more focused on learning from challenging course assignments. As such, we predicted that those with greater self-compassion would report more mastery-oriented, rather than performance-oriented academic goals, as previous research has shown (Neff et al., 2005). Contrary to our predictions, self-compassion was unrelated to scores on the four academic goals measures. Although research by Eliot and colleagues (2001) demonstrated strong internal consistency estimates for the four academic motivation goals, each subscale includes only three items. For future studies, we plan to include a more comprehensive measure of achievement motivation goals to address this surprising finding.

Our study investigated the links among self-views, academic worry and motivation, yet further research is needed to explore how these factors impact *behavior*. Specifically, we plan to explore whether self-compassion predicts procrastination behavior among a diverse sample of college undergraduates. In addition, we will include other factors, such as fear of failure, academic preparation, and grade point average, which may mitigate the relationships between self-compassion, procrastination tendencies, and behavior.

This line of research has practical implications for students in two ways. First, because procrastination tendency is related to academic stress and other potentially negative outcomes (e.g. low course grades), it is important to identify the factors that contribute to actual

procrastination behavior. Students may be acutely aware of their procrastination tendencies, but may lack the knowledge and motivation to change their behavior. Further, students may be completely unaware of the critical role that self-attitudes play in this process. Second, Neff and colleagues have connected low self-compassion to a host of negative psychological issues, such as neuroticism, depressive symptoms, and anxiety (Neff, 2008, in press; Neff et al., 2007). Research on techniques to enhance self-compassion in a clinical setting has demonstrated positive outcomes, but additional work in this area is needed in order to examine long-term effects in an academic environment (Neff et al., 2007). Our study is an attempt to contribute to this burgeoning area of research on self-compassionate attitudes and their influences on academic motivation and performance.

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