

Negative and positive perfectionism as predictors of procrastination in female high school students in Tehran, Iran

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Abstract

Research has shown a relationship between procrastination and perfectionism, i.e. perfectionists generally tend to procrastinate. Therefore, the present study evaluated negative and positive perfectionism as predictors of procrastination in female high school students. This correlational study was conducted in 2015-16 academic year. The statistical population comprised all high school sophomores and juniors in Tehran, Iran. The research sample consisted of 300 female students. During the field data collection phase, the Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale and Procrastination Scale were completed by the subjects. Perfectionism and its subscales were significantly related with procrastination in female high school students ($P < 0.001$). Based on the calculated regression coefficient (0.001), negative perfectionism was a predictor of procrastination in high school girls. In addition, positive perfectionism had a negative relationship with procrastination. A combination of negative perfectionism, anxiety, and stress can predict procrastination and malfunction in female high school students. Therefore, in order to modify perfectionist behaviors, perfectionist students (especially negative perfectionists) need to be identified and encouraged to participate in psychological training and individual/group counseling programs. Such interventions will not only reduce the students' anxiety and tendency toward procrastination, but also improve their mental health and academic achievements.

Keywords: Negative and positive perfectionism, procrastination, students, girl.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have identified different aspects of perfectionism. Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) defined perfectionism as the setting of extremely high standards while also being overly critical during self-evaluations. When students cannot reach these unrealistic goals, they are harshly critical of themselves. A social-cognitive perspective suggests that the high demands and lack of warmth displayed by authoritarian parents may create internalized cognitive expectancies of unrealistic standards in their children, while the high demands and warmth of authoritative parents may not (quoted by Soysa & Weiss, 2014). Classification of perfectionism as normal or neurotic suggests the positive and negative forms of this personality trait (Bieling et al., 2004). Positive or adaptive perfectionism is characterized by setting high, yet accessible, personal standards, seeking order, organization, and excellence in tasks, and feeling satisfied with one's own performance and motivated to achieve positive rewards. On the other hand, negative or maladaptive perfectionism is characterized by unrealistically high standards, excessive concerns about mistakes and cognitive deficits, perception of high pressure from others to be faultless, perception of a huge discrepancy between personal performance and standards, compulsive doubts about one's actions, and avoidance of consequences of one's actions (Rice, Richardson & Clark, 2012).

Procrastination, i.e. a strategy adopted to avoid negative emotions, is a major consequence of negative perfectionism (Sirois & Tosti, 2012). In other words, by constant procrastination, people with maladaptive perfectionism avoid doing particular tasks in order to never experience the negative emotions they may cause (Baumeister et al., 1994; Kennedy & Tuckman, 2013). Procrastination is also a strategy to control intense thoughts, emotions, and performance. In fact, people may use procrastination to delay the experience of negative emotions and anxiety and give themselves more time to manage problems. Since passing of time can help people adapt to the situation, such an approach can reduce stress in the short run (Howell & Watson, 2007). A large body of literature has documented a relationship between chronic, unhealthy, and excessive procrastination and some disordered personal traits (Flett et al., 2012). Procrastination can have negative impacts on all aspects of one's life. Previous studies have introduced numerous parameters, such as leisure time management skills, self-effectiveness beliefs, feeling uncomfortable when doing tasks, personality traits (e.g. responsibility, perfectionism, and neurotic tendencies), irrational thoughts, lack of concentration, fear of failure, unreal expectations, and work habits, as predisposing factors for procrastination (Balkis & Duru, 2007; Howell & Watson, 2007). Some probable causes of procrastination are evaluation of anxiety, difficulty in decision-making, rebellion against control, instability, fear of inability to continue the chain of success, and perfectionism beyond one's actual competency (Watson, 2001). Studies confirm the relationship between perfectionism and procrastination. Flett and Hewitt (2005) identified disabling levels of fear of failure and perception of inability to reach excessively high standards as the social mediators of the relationship between perfectionism and procrastination. Such factors may result in feelings of inferiority, worthlessness, low self-acceptance, and emptiness.

Antoni et al. (1988; according to Stoeber & Eismann, 2007) investigated the relationship between anxiety, procrastination, and perfectionism in 180 students. They found fundamental relationships between anxiety, especially excessive concerns about mistakes and hesitations, and procrastination and perfectionism. In addition, anxiety was related to parents' criticisms and expectations. In contrast, people who experienced high levels of anxiety under pressure reported lower standards. According to Flett and Hewitt (2002), although procrastination is to some extent experienced by all people, it turns into a disorder in perfectionists and serves as the best method of avoiding tasks. Likewise, another study reported a direct relationship between procrastination and perfectionism, i.e. people with higher levels of perfectionism experienced higher degrees of procrastination.

Based on previous research, negative perfectionism, which is accompanied by anxiety, stress, procrastination, and malfunction, exerts negative effects on students' academic achievements and

social competence. Despite the importance of this issue, few studies have investigated the relationship between perfectionism and procrastination in students. In addition, none of the available studies have considered the impacts of gender on the mentioned relationship (no research has actually focused on female students). Therefore, the present study evaluated the relationship between perfectionism and procrastination in female students.

2. Method

This correlational study was conducted in 2015-16 academic year. The statistical population comprised all female high school sophomores and juniors in Tehran, Iran. In order to select the research sample ($n = 300$), all high schools in Tehran were listed and 18 high schools were randomly selected. One second grade and one third grade class was then randomly selected from each school. After making the required arrangements with school principals, the students were explained about the study objectives and asked to provide written informed consent. The following questionnaires were then administered to collect data:

2.1. Tools

The Positive and Negative Perfectionism (PNP) Scale: The PNP Scale contains 40 items to assess both positive and negative perfectionism ($n = 20$ each). Since all items are scored on a five-point Likert scale from one to five, its minimum and maximum total scores in each subscale are 20 and 100, respectively. The Persian version of the PNP Scale was administered on a sample of 212 university students. The Cronbach's alpha of the items in the positive and negative perfectionism subscales was reported as respectively 0.90 and 0.87 in all subjects. The corresponding values were 0.91 and 0.88 in girls and 0.89 and 0.86 in boys. These values indicate the high internal consistency of the scale. The test-retest reliability coefficient of the scale, measured by testing 90 individuals twice (with a four-week interval), was calculated as $r = 0.86$ for all subjects and $r = 0.84$ for female subjects (Besharat, 2003).

Principle component analysis was applied to determine the validity of the PNP Scale by calculating correlation coefficients between its subscales and those of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) (Goldberg, 1972). The correlation coefficients between the positive perfectionism subscale of the PNP Scale and the somatic symptoms, anxiety/insomnia, social dysfunction, and depression subscales of the GHQ were -0.32, -0.41, -0.54, and -0.58, respectively. The corresponding correlation coefficients between the negative perfectionism subscale of the PNP Scale and the subscales of the GHQ were 0.33, 0.39, 0.57, and 0.63. The correlation coefficients between the two subscales of the PNP Scale and total scores of the GHQ were -0.46 and 0.48, respectively. The correlation coefficients between positive and negative perfectionism subscales and self-esteem were 0.44 and -0.52, respectively (Besharat, 2003).

Procrastination Scale: This 20-item scale was developed by Lay in 1986 (according to Sadeghi et al., 2014). All items of the scale are scored on a five-point Likert scale from one to five. Nine items (3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 17, 19) are scored inversely. In order to ensure the content validity of the tool, it was revised based on expert opinions to better fit the attitudes and culture of the study population. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.75 confirmed the reliability of the scale. Sadeghi et al. (2014) reported the validity coefficient of this questionnaire as 0.90.

2. Findings

Table 1 summarizes the students' scores of perfectionism and procrastination. As seen, the highest and lowest mean scores were observed in case of perfectionism (141.90) and procrastination (54.19), respectively. The maximum and minimum standard deviation was related to perfectionism (16.14) and procrastination (9.20), respectively.

Table 1. Mean scores of perfectionism and procrastination among female students (n = 300)

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Procrastination	54.19	9.20
Perfectionism	141.90	16.14
Positive perfectionism	77.46	9.94
Negative perfectionism	64.43	9.82

As Table 2 shows, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results suggested the normal distribution of procrastination data and thus regression presumptions were satisfied. Since the distribution of perfectionism data was not normal, natural logarithm of the data was used.

Table 2. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results for research variables

	Procrastination	Perfectionism	Positive perfectionism	Negative perfectionism
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	1.52	1.06	1.08	1.22
P	0.02	0.20	0.18	0.10

According to Table 3, perfectionism and its subscales are predictors of procrastination in female students ($P = 0.001$).

Table 3. The results of multiple regression analysis to evaluate perfectionism and its subscales as predictors of procrastination in female high school students

	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean square	F	P
Regression	2.94	2	1.47	52.44	0.001
Residual	8.34	297	0.02		
Total	11.28	299			

As seen in Table 4, regression coefficients indicated that positive and negative perfectionism were both predictors of procrastination in female high school students. Meanwhile, they had respectively a negative and a positive relationship with procrastination.

Table 4. Standardized and non-standardized regression coefficients of perfectionism and its subscales as predictors of procrastination in female high school students

	R	R2	ARS	Non-standard coefficients		Standardized coefficients	
				B	SE	Beta	T(P)
Negative perfectionism				4.79	0.08		57.55
				0.008	0.001	0.40	7.73
							0.001
Positive perfectionism				-0.004	0.001	-0.19	-3.75
							0.001

As Table 5 shows, perfectionism and its subscales had significant relationships with procrastination in female high school students ($P < 0.001$). In other words, while there was a positive relationship between negative perfectionism and procrastination, positive perfectionism and procrastination were negatively related.

Table 5. Spearman's correlation coefficients between procrastination and perfectionism and its subscales in female high school students

		Procrastination	Perfectionism	Positive perfectionism	Negative perfectionism
Procrastination	P	1	0.35**	-0.27**	0.33**
	Significance		0.001	0.001	0.001
Perfectionism	P		1	0.82**	0.77**
	Significance			0.001	0.001
Positive perfectionism	P			1	-0.32**
	Significance				0.000
Negative perfectionism	P				1
	Significance				

4- Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study confirmed a relationship between perfectionism and procrastination in female students. Regression coefficients suggested negative perfectionism as a predictor of procrastination in female high school students. Meanwhile, positive perfectionism was negatively related with procrastination. In other words, students with higher levels of positive perfectionism were at lower risk of procrastination. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies. Rice et al. (2012) reported negative perfectionism to have significant relationships with procrastination and its dimensions (including concentration, time management, and concerns about performing tasks). Flett et al. (1992) discussed that people experience procrastination due to their perfectionism. Researches detected a relationship between egoistic perfectionism and academic procrastination (Klingsieck, 2013).

Procrastination may be accompanied by a variety of problems. In fact, while many people believe procrastination would provide them with more time to deal with a particular problem, such a behavior will gradually intensify, become a permanent part of their personality, and decrease one's performance (Klingsieck, 2013). The procrastination which was once regarded as an opportunity will then turn into a weakness and laziness in performing tasks and reduce the procrastinator's work efficiency and social functioning. The procrastinator will be ultimately abandoned.

Perfectionists' way of thinking can somehow be a bipolar all-or-nothing type of thinking. Failure in achieving the high standards and targets they set for themselves will make them experience various negative emotions such as shame, guilt, anger, and depression (Flett et al., 2012). They hence cling to procrastination to avoid the negative emotions and their consequent reduction in performance. Thus, perfectionism, particularly negative perfectionism, predicts procrastination both directly (by intensifying one's obsession with complete and ideal fulfillment of assignments and responsibilities) and indirectly (by causing high levels of stress and fear of failure which in turn reduce one's performance level and lead to malfunction). Increased self-consciousness is also caused by feelings of shame and guilt, which are related to self-assessment and formed as a result of perfectionist thoughts (Kagan, Cakir, Ilhan & Kandemir, 2010). Negative self-conscious emotions will bring about different outcomes depending on their pathology and the individual's adaptability and interpersonal relationships (Soyas & Weiss, 2014). Therefore, in case of failure in achieving their goals, perfectionists may dissociate and face difficulty in interpersonal relationships. They may also experience malfunction and mental health disorders.

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