

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-COMPASSION AND ACADEMIC PROCRASTINATION BEING MEDIATED BY SHAME AND ANXIETY

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Abstract: This study was conducted to investigate the direct and indirect influences of self-compassion on procrastination among Assumption University students in Thailand. The sample consisted of 200 respondents (male: $n=74$, 37%; female: $n=126$, 63%) who voluntarily filled in the study's survey questionnaire consisting of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI- Form Y) to measure anxiety; the Procrastination Assessment Scale for Students (PASS) to measure the level of academic procrastination; the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) to measure the level of self-compassion, and the Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 (TOSCA-3) to measure the level of shame. Results from the path analysis indicated that the participants' reported level of self-compassion was negatively associated with their level of academic procrastination; that is, the higher their level of self-compassion, the lower their reported level of academic procrastination. It was also found that self-compassion had a negative influence on the participants' reported level of anxiety. Their reported level of self-compassion was not found to have any significant influence on their reported level of shame. Finally, neither shame nor anxiety had a significant influence on academic procrastination. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Procrastination, Academic Procrastination, Self-compassion, Shame, Anxiety, Graduate Students

Introduction

For many university students, setting goals and accomplishing tasks that are directly relevant to the achievement of these goals are part-and-parcel of their academic life. However, despite having the best intentions, many students fail to complete their academic tasks in a timely manner. In other words, for many students, the desire to procrastinate represents a barrier to the successful completion of their degrees.

Procrastination is generally defined as the intention or the thought of completing a task but failing to finish the task within the expected time limit (Senecal, Koestner,

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& Vallerand, 1995). It is the act of delaying starting or completion of a task that needs to be done by a given time. Procrastination is considered a maladaptive behavioral habit which often results in a vicious cycle of putting tasks off until the last minute and experiencing the discomfort of knowing that time has just about to run out. The results are anxiety and stress in trying to get an important task done on time, and the feeling of despair in knowing that the result can never be as good as if one had not procrastinated. Beswick, Rothblum, and Mann (1988) found a negative relationship between procrastination and academic performance, with students who procrastinate by putting off studying for their exam experiencing greater anxiety during the exam. At this point it is necessary to make a distinction between procrastination and simple delay. According to Pychyl (2010), when people delay certain tasks due to unforeseen/uncontrollable life circumstances (e.g., a child's illness), they are actually setting priorities, and as this is not a voluntary delay, it is not procrastination. However, when one procrastinates, one *needlessly* and *voluntarily* chooses to put off an intended action that needs to be attended to at present.

One potential explanation for the individual's tendency to put off tasks could be the negative emotions linked to an activity. In their review of the intra-personal processes underlying procrastination, Sirois and Pychyl (2013) suggested that procrastination may be described as prioritizing of short-term mood regulation at the cost of long-term goals. Procrastination generally takes place when individuals are faced with tasks that are perceived as aversive (Blunt & Pychyl, 2000). In the face of unpleasant feelings and negative mood brought about by aversive tasks, many individuals resort to engaging in avoidant behavior that temporarily relieves them of the distress associated with the task at hand (Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000). In other words, they focus on short-term mood repair as a strategy to regulate their emotions (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). Thus, procrastination can be considered a strategy employed by the individual to deal with distressing emotions such as shame and anxiety experienced when faced with a perceived aversive task.

The Relationship between Procrastination and Anxiety

Past research has clearly shown a positive relationship between feeling of anxiety and the tendency to procrastinate on important tasks. For example, McCown and Johnson (1991), found that when faced with an anxiety-provoking activity, people with the tendency to procrastinate are more likely to engage in tasks that are less anxiety-provoking, and therefore putting off the main task to some other time. Rothblum et al. (1986) found that students high in test anxiety and anxiety-related symptoms tend to procrastinate frequently. Similarly, Beswick et al. (1988) and Senécal et al. (1995) found procrastination to be associated with trait and/or state anxiety. In support of these findings, Hobfoll (1989) proposed the Appraisal-Anxiety-Avoidance (AAA) model to explain the link between feelings of anxiety and the tendency to procrastinate. According to this model, if an individual perceives a situation as *intimidating* and they see themselves as *incompetent* to deal with the threat, they tend to escape from it. Thus, according to this model, people high in fear of failure or feelings of discomfort in performing certain types of tasks, experience high level of anxiety, and as a way to alleviate their anxiety, they put off these tasks. For highly anxious people, procrastination takes on the quality of a potent negative reinforcer.

The Relationship between Procrastination and Shame

The relationship between shame and procrastination appears to be obvious and logical. Shame, as a self-conscious emotion, entails looking at the *self* as flawed and inadequate, such as *I am a bad person*. What accompanies this global negative evaluation about the self is the desire to keep one's self out of sight and to disappear. In a similar vein, a major reason why procrastinators procrastinate is because of fear of receiving a negative evaluation. As suggested by Fee and Tangney (2000), one way for individuals to escape from loss of face and feeling of shame is to procrastinate, that is, to escape from the immediate task in order to save one's face.

The Relationship between Procrastination and Self-Compassion

One of the promising avenues to further research and intervention on procrastination is the construct of self-compassion. Self-compassion entails the need for as well as the act of being kind towards oneself in the experience of hardship (Salzberg, 1997). According to Neff (2003a), self-compassion is defined as involving three components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Studies have indicated that people high in self-compassion are less prone to self-criticism, anxiety, and depression (Neff, 2003a). Additionally, they enjoy more feelings of connectedness and satisfaction in life. Finally, they are less prone to rumination and thought suppression, and they tend to pay attention to their feelings and make sense of them (Neff, 2003a). A study by Breines and Chen (2012) on the effect of self-compassion on self-improvement motivation suggests that self-compassion's bolstering of positive emotion curbs the influence of negative feelings and attitude towards the self and helps individuals see that they are not defined by their shortcomings. In sum, self-compassion allows for recognition of one's suffering and moving beyond that suffering in order to have a more adaptive life by adopting a more balanced awareness and expression of self-kindness (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). On the other hand, less self-compassionate individuals are more prone to types of mental states that involve rumination, isolation, and self-criticism (Neff, 2003b).

The Relationship between Self-Compassion and Shame

From a conceptual perspective, it seems reasonable to expect self-compassion to help lessen the experience of shame. The underlying components of self-compassion - mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity - appear to be effective in dealing with different aspects of shame, such as withdrawal from social life, avoidance of painful experiences, and self-devaluation. In line with this conceptual perspective, a study by Barnard and Curry (2012) reported a strong negative relationship between self-compassion and shame. Studies with academic samples have shown self-compassion to be negatively associated with self-blaming and positively linked with fewer self-critical thoughts (e.g., Leary et al., 2007). In clinical settings, Compassion Mind Training (CMT) was developed as a means of intervention for high shame and self-critical people (Gilbert & Irons, 2005). Taken together, past research findings suggest strongly that being self-compassionate or developing self-compassion has soothing quality that can counteract the threat of self-attack and self-criticism that accompany shame.

The Relationship between Self-Compassion and Anxiety

With respect to the relationship between self-compassion and anxiety, self-compassion can be regarded as a valuable emotional regulation strategy, and as such it makes sense to expect that individuals high in self-compassion, as compared to those low in self-compassion, would show healthier mental functioning, such as lower levels of anxiety and depression (Neff, 2003a). In examining the idea that self-compassion may help individuals to deal more effectively with negative life experiences, Leary et al. (2007) found that self-compassionate individuals reported less personalizing, greater equanimity, and less catastrophizing. In another study conducted by Williams, Stark, and Foster (2008), they found that students who were high in self-compassion exhibited less academic anxiety than those low in self-compassion. Overall, these findings suggest that self-compassion can be a protective resource against anxiety, particularly in situations perceived as stressful.

Academic procrastination has reached such alarming levels among university students that unless the trend can be halted or reversed, the practice will disrupt the academic lives of many students who have the best intention to achieve academic success, but fail in their endeavor. According to Ferrari (2010), 70% of doctoral students fail to complete their degree, with an increasing number of students reporting problems with procrastination (Kachgal, et al., 2001). Despite the fact that procrastination is such a widespread phenomenon affecting the lives of so many undergraduate and graduate students, very few studies have been conducted to investigate the association between self-compassion and procrastination (Sirois, 2014; Williams, Stark, & Foster, 2008; Iskender, 2011). While past empirical studies on procrastination have tended to focus on the factors that are associated with the motive to procrastinate, there is a dearth of literature and empirical findings on its antecedents as well as potential mediating variables. The current study examined the direct and indirect influences of self-compassion on procrastination among Assumption University students in Thailand. More specifically, the study has been designed to investigate the research question of how may self-compassion influence students' academic procrastination both directly and indirectly, being mediated by their levels of anxiety and shame? Figure 1 presents the fully identified path model to be tested.

(See Figure 1 on the next page)

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of graduate university students studying at Assumption University, Thailand. The participants were recruited via convenience sampling. The sample consisted of 200 respondents of whom 74 (37%) were male and 126 (63%) were female. Their ages ranged from 21 years to 52 years, with a mean age ranging from 23 to 38 years. The respondents were studying in various programs in Business, Law, Psychology, Management, Philosophy, IT, Tourism, and English Language Teaching. The durations of their study ranged from half a year to 6 years.

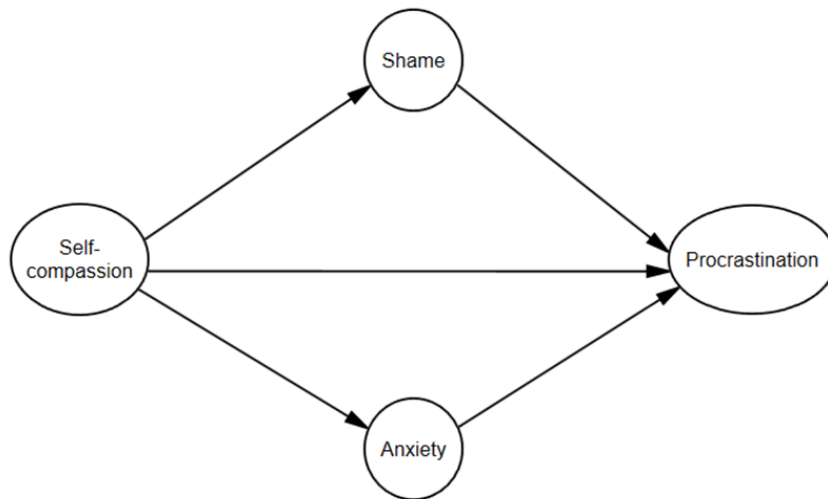


Figure 1: Path Model of The Predictive Relationship between Self-Compassion and Procrastination Both Directly and Indirectly, Being Mediated By The Affective Components of Anxiety and Shame

Research Instrumentation

The present study employed a self-administered survey questionnaire consisting of five sections. Prior to filling in the study's questionnaire, potential participants were informed of the general purpose of the study, that participation is completely voluntary, and that they can withdraw from the study anytime without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from every participant prior to filling in the questionnaire.

Section 1 consisted of a researcher-constructed section written to tap the participants' age, gender, university program or major, and year in the program.

Section 2 consisted of The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) (Spielberger et al., 1983). The measure consists of 40 items in two sub-scales measuring state and trait anxiety. The S-Anxiety section (Form Y-1) assesses individuals' anxiety levels "in the moment", involving feelings of nervousness, worry, and apprehension. The T-Anxiety section (Form Y-2) measures participants' "general" levels of anxiety as a personality trait. The total score for both sub-scales ranges from 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating higher levels of anxiety.

Section 3 consisted of the 18-item Procrastination Assessment Scale for Students (PASS) developed by Solomon and Rothblum (1984) to tap the prevalence of procrastination by college students. The 18 items were written to measure the prevalence of procrastination in six academic areas. A total procrastination score is calculated by summing the scores across the 6 academic areas with the total score ranging from 18 to 90, with higher scores indicating higher levels of academic procrastination.

Section 4 consisted of the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) developed by Neff (2003a) to assess levels of self-compassion. The SCS yields the six sub-scales

of *Self-Kindness* (5 items), *Self-Judgment* (5 items), *Common Humanity* (4 items), *Isolation* (4 items), *Mindfulness* (4 items), and *Over-Identification* (4 items). A total score is obtained by summing across the sub-scales' scores, with scores of Self-judgment, Over-identification, and Isolation being reverse-coded. Higher scores on the SCS indicate higher levels of self-compassion.

Section 5 consisted of the Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 (TOSCA-3) (Tangney, et al., 2000) measuring shame-proneness. The score for the Shame scale is the sum of the respondent's answer to items 1a, 2b, 3e, 4a, 5c, 6c, 7a, 8a, 9b, 10d, 11b, 12b, 13b, 14a, 15a, and 16c. The scores for the Shame scale range from 16 to 80, with higher score indicating higher level of shame.

Procedure

A pretest of the questionnaire was conducted on a sample of 20 students prior to the actual study to check for errors and for readability. Data collection took the following procedural steps. Participants were solicited from graduate programs. In order to ensure a diverse sample, participants were contacted from different departments. Questionnaires were distributed to the participants in their classes and the necessary instructions and information about confidentiality and anonymity were provided. The researcher conducted the study in person and was present with the participants in order to make any necessary clarification.

Results

Path Analysis

In order to test the hypothesized direct and indirect relationships indicated by the path model in Figure 1, path analysis via multiple regression analysis was conducted. The analyses involved (1) regressing the dependent variable of academic procrastination on the predictor variables of self-compassion, shame, and anxiety; and (2) regressing the mediator variables of shame and anxiety on the predictor variable of self-compassion. The results of this path analysis are provided in Figure 2.

(See Figure 2 on the next page)

The results showed that the participants' level of self-compassion has a direct negative relationship with their reported prevalence of academic procrastination. Therefore, the higher the respondents' reported level of self-compassion, the less frequent they reported procrastinating on academic tasks, (Beta = $-.30$). Self-compassion was not found to have any indirect influences on academic procrastination being mediated by the participants' reported levels of trait anxiety and shame. However, self-compassion was found to be negatively related to anxiety, such that the higher the respondents' level of self-compassion, the lower their reported level of anxiety, (Beta = $-.52$). The respondents' level of anxiety however was not found to be related to their reported prevalence of academic procrastination.

Figure 2 also reports the standardized residual for each dependent variable for the path model. These coefficients provide an estimate of the proportion of variance in each dependent variable not predicted by the model. Alternatively,

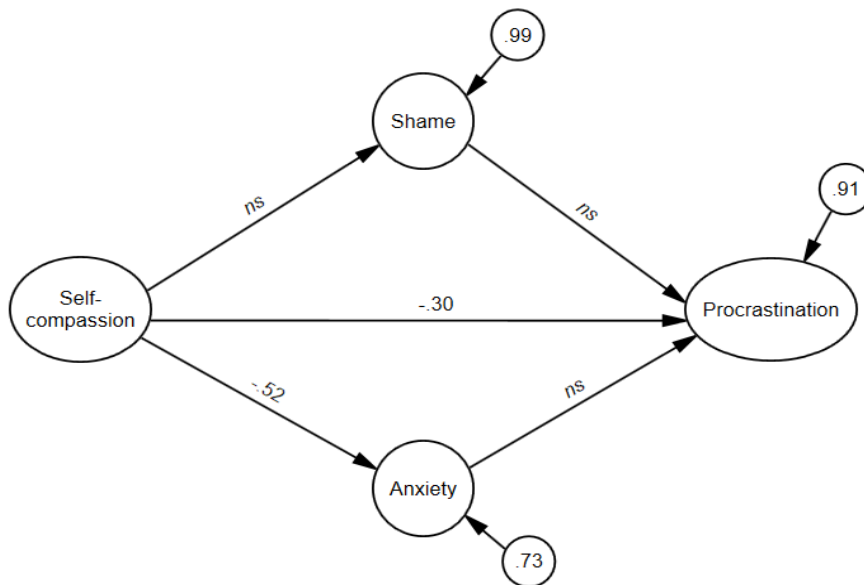


Figure 2: Path Model of The Predictive Relationship between Self-Compassion and Procrastination Both Directly and Indirectly, Being Mediated by The Affective Components of Anxiety and Shame (Ns = Not Significant, $p < .05$)

subtracting these values from 1.00 indicates the proportion of variance predicted by the model. These coefficients indicated that the path model accounted for 1% of the variance in shame, 27% of the variance in trait anxiety and 9% of the variance in the reported prevalence of procrastination.

Discussion

Results from the path analysis indicated that the students' level of self-compassion had a direct influence on their reported level of academic procrastination. Thus, the higher the participants' reported level of self-compassion the lower was their reported level of academic procrastination. This finding is in line with those obtained from past studies which have shown an inverse relationship between self-compassion and procrastination. For example, in a meta-analysis on the link between self-compassion and procrastination, Sirois (2013) found that self-compassion is moderately and negatively correlated with trait-procrastination. In a study conducted with college undergraduates, Williams, Stark, and Foster (2008) found that students high in self-compassion reported less inclination to procrastinate on academic tasks.

Results from the path analysis indicated that the emotive variable of shame was not a significant mediator between the participants' reported level of self-compassion and their tendency to procrastinate. This finding runs contrary to those obtained from previous studies which have shown a strong inverse relationship between shame and self-compassion. As articulated earlier, treating the self as inadequate and devaluing and criticizing oneself can give rise to feelings of shame which in turn, can adversely

affect the individual in different areas of his/her functioning. As pointed out by Gilbert and Irons (2005), fostering a sense of self-compassion can help individuals relieve the destructive effects of shame. This contention can be conceptually justified since the three elements of self-compassion - *self-kindness*, *mindfulness*, *common humanity* – are assumed to counteract the adverse effects arising from feelings of shame, such as withdrawal from social life, avoidance of painful experiences, and negative self-devaluation. In terms of the hypothesized mediating role of shame, the current study also did not find shame to be significantly related to procrastination. This finding is unexpected and indeed runs contrary to those obtained from previous research. Concerns over negative evaluation (resulting in shame) and the need to escape and to self-protect are assumed to underlie the relationship between shame and the tendency to procrastinate.

One reason why this study failed to find significant relationships between shame and the factors of self-compassion and procrastination maybe partly due to how shame was operationalized in the present study. Feeling of shame is a highly sensitive affective state and it is unclear whether the participants in the study were totally honest in their responses to the shame scale's items or that their responses merely reflected their social desirability bias. According to Lewis (2008), there has been little attention given to self-conscious emotions like shame, which can explain why the instrument employed in the present study could have failed to adequately operationalize the levels of shame. He proposed two reasons for this, one related to observation and the other related to elicitors of these emotions. First, to describe emotions such shame or guilt, one cannot merely study facial expressions; rather, one needs to pay attention to bodily movement as well. Second, self-conscious emotions are not evoked by clear and identifiable elicitors.

With respect to the proposed mediating role of anxiety, the current study did not find a significant relationship between trait anxiety and academic procrastination among the study's student participants. From a theoretical perspective there is a wealth of information to suggest that the experience of heightened anxiety is related to task disengagement, as in the case of procrastination. However, in terms of empirical support, research on the relationship between anxiety and procrastination had produced equivocal results, with some studies showing a significant relationship while others showing no relationship at all. In explaining these inconsistencies from a methodological perspective, Milgram and Toubiana (1999) argued that how the concepts of procrastination and anxiety were operationalized did not always correspond with each other. This lack of correspondence is between the measurement components to which each variable refers to. For instance, Flet et al. (1995) investigated the relationship between test anxiety, which measures anxiety on specified tasks related to test-taking, and general procrastination on unspecified tasks, as well as the relationship between general anxiety, where there are no specified tasks, and academic procrastination, where there are specified tasks on which students procrastinate. When there was correspondence between task-specific anxiety (e.g., test anxiety) and academic procrastination, it was more likely to find a relationship between anxiety and procrastination, i.e., when anxiety and procrastination were both measured with respect to the same tasks such as writing term papers or doing reading assignments. On the other hand, when there was little correspondence between task-

specific anxiety and procrastination (e.g., general procrastination), no significant relationship was evident. These findings suggest that we cannot expect anxiety to be related to procrastination on a specific reading assignment if the type of anxiety that was measured referred to one's overall tendency to feel anxiety and not anxiety related to the specific task of reading assignment on which procrastination was being measured.

The results from the path analysis showed that the participants' reported level of anxiety was significantly and inversely related to their reported level of self-compassion. As such, the higher individuals' level of self-reported self-compassion, the lower their tendency to experience feelings of anxiety. This finding corroborates those obtained from previous studies which indicate that, particularly in the face of hardship, self-compassion can lead to healthier mental functioning such as lower anxiety and depression (Neff et al., 2003a; Leary et al., 2007). As Raes (2009) pointed out, although the literature is not clear about the mechanisms involved in the beneficial impact of self-compassion on anxiety, there are possible explanations for this positive effect.

Limitations of The Study

There are limitations to any empirical study and the present study is no exception. First, the specificity of the sample (consisting only of graduate students from Assumption University of Thailand) clearly limits the external validity of the study's findings. As such, given the restrictions in the characteristics of the sample, generalizing the findings of the study to the broader population of students must be done with caution.

Second, the failure to demonstrate shame as a significant mediator between self-compassion and procrastination could be due to the way this concept was operationalized in the present study. As mentioned earlier, shame can be considered a *self-conscious emotion* which may not be easily measured in a simple self-report scale such as the one employed in the present study. This is because self-conscious emotions are not evoked by clear and identifiable elicitors. Thus, when studying and measuring self-conscious emotions, there are intricate cognitive processes at work which center around the concept of the self and which may not be captured adequately by a simple self-report scale.

Third, the present study employed path analysis which is correlational and not experimental (i.e., the study did not manipulate the main variables). As such, the design of study failed to establish causality, and the obtained results can only be explained in terms of relationships.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from the present study suggest that self-compassion has a positive influence on procrastination by lowering the participants' tendency to procrastinate in their academic tasks. While this finding is reassuring, there is still much more to be investigated about the positive role that self-compassion plays in promoting positive living. For the present study what remains unclear are the mechanisms through which self-compassion exerts its positive influences on the way individuals live their lives. Furthermore, in line with positive psychology, the present

study clearly demonstrates that self-compassion is a significant positive psychological attribute that conjures up inter-connectedness, feelings of kindness and equanimity, high levels of optimism, motivation, and positive affect in countering life's adversities.

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