PHENOMENOLOGY OF SERIOUS ACDEMIC PROCRASTINATION AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Azlina Mohd Kosnin[1] and Muhammad Umar Khan[2]

Procrastination is the delay of an important task in favor of a less important one. Procrastination has a lot of negative effects in a wide range of life spheres; however, it is especially a big problem in academics. Academic procrastination a troublesome phenomenon for almost all university students to some extent, and it has widely been studied in undergraduate students in Western countries with less emphasis on its intensity and related cognitions. Therefore the cognitions related to the experience of extreme academic procrastination need to be explored. The need of such a study is even more evident when considering postgraduate students in Asian context because it is understudied in this milieu. The current study explored the cognitions related to the experience of extreme and problematic (serious) procrastination among postgraduate students of Malaysia. Eight participants were selected to take part in this study based on their extreme scores (more than 48) on the Tuckman procrastination scale and a self report that they find procrastination in education to be one of their biggest problems. All participants were then interviewed to find out about their experience of serious procrastination. The interviews were then analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The result of the analysis showed one master themes called 'concept of procrastination: getting blurred and running away'; under this master theme, five superordinate themes emerged *i.e.* indecision, calming down by putting away important thing, control from outside oneself, generalized delay affecting education more, and perceived consequences of delay.

Keywords: Serious Academic Procrastination, Postgraduate Students, Phenomenology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education (or tertiary education) is usually imparted at college and university level around the world. Additionally, most of the tertiary level education institutes, especially the universities, focus on producing researchers (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009). Research is one of the most important aspects of modern economies. Nowadays, the challenge of building and sustaining a nation's growth depends largely upon the research throughput of universities of that nation. This research throughput ultimately adds to the building of a country's knowledge based economy or *k*-economy. *K*-economies usually outperform labor-intensive agricultural and also newly industrialized ones (Niu *et al.*, 2010). Doing research is crucial for economies that are either developing or are yet to become fully developed. Such economies are sometimes referred to as middle-income economies. Therefore, it is imperative to note that developing countries and middle-income

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1   Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, *E-mail: p-azlina@utm.my*
2   Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, *E-mail: ukmuhammad2@live.utm.my*

countries need a lot of research activities and a human resource that can support such activities (Altbach, 2013). Malaysia is among such countries; a middle-income country aspiring to become a developed one. Malaysia is emphasizing on increasing the amount of their research activities at university level. Malaysian government wants to increase the number of their citizens holding doctorate degrees (PhDs). Moreover, Malaysia aims to produce high quality research with the help of her postgraduate students at universities (Azman *et al.*, 2014). Altbach (2013) has also pointed out that postgraduate students at universities usually spearhead the research that contributes to the increase in knowledge base of nations. Consequently, postgraduate research students can be considered an asset and their needs ought to be considered quite important to be met. Postgraduate studies generally and research studies especially require a person to regulate their own learning (Ferrari, 1991; Santrock, 2011). Research is an activity that postgraduate students, most often, need to undertake as a requirement of their completion of their studies; this research is usually unstructured and is different from structured coursework routines students are usually accustomed to (Manathunga, 2002; Yeager, 2008). One of the hindrances that postgraduate research students can face in completing their studies is procrastination (Spady, 1970; Ferrari *et al.*, 1995; Yeager, 2008).

Procrastination is a failure to regulate oneself effectively; it is a counterproductive delay when one postpones important tasks needing urgent attention in favor of other less important tasks (Ferrari *et al.*, 1995; Steel, 2007, 2011; Pychyl and Flett, 2012). Procrastination has a number of bad consequences for a person that range from academic difficulties to psychological and physical health problems (Steel, 2007). Procrastination done on academic tasks such as study assignments and doing research is known as academic procrastination (Steel, 2007). Despite being a phenomenon detrimental to the academic lives of students, procrastination has not been given as serious importance by researchers as it should have been given (Schraw *et al.*, 2007; Pychyl and Flett, 2012; Rozental and Carlbring, 2014). This tendency to discount procrastination as a possible research topic seemingly stems from the notion that most of the humans procrastinate to some extent and it is not always possible to do what one intends (Schraw *et al.*, 2007; Pychyl and Flett, 2012). On the other hand, such a neglect of procrastination in previous research has left a lot of room to be explored especially when studying serious or high intensity procrastination. High intensities (or higher levels) of procrastination can be way more incapacitating for the affected than the regular or mild procrastination that is experienced by people at large (Rothblum, 1986; Tuckman *et al.*, 2008; Patrzek *et al.*, 2012; Pychyl and Flett, 2012). A recent study has even categorized people according to their levels of procrastination and has labeled people with highest level of procrastination as 'unregulated' (Rebetez *et al.*, 2015). However, exploratory and extensive research about high intensity procrastination is relatively

scant in the current academic literature. Moreover the cognitions espousing procrastination are still largely unknown (Rebetez *et. al.*, 2015). Therefore, the present study will chiefly focus on the cognitions of serious (high intensity and troublesome) academic procrastination among postgraduate students in order to address this gap in literature.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the cognitions (thoughts, beliefs, personal definitions) that are associated with serious procrastination?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study specifically selected postgraduate students who were serious procrastinators, as its participants. First, a questionnaire, containing a Malay translated and adapted version, of an academic procrastination scale called Tuckman procrastination scale (1991) was emailed to all the active Malaysian postgraduate students of a public sector research university in western part of Malaysia. The students who responded and their score was above the severe procrastination range of 48 (Tuckman *et al.*, 2008) of this scale were contacted for initial inquiry. From among those students, those who described themselves as having a big problem of delaying important academic task were further requested for interview. Hence 8 people were finally interviewed using unstructured interview technique. The unstructured interview, however, revolved around the topic of delay in doing academic tasks and what they thought about it. The interviews were then transcribed in verbatim. Then interpretative phenomenological analysis was used in order to better understand the narratives of the participants. Six of the participants were females and two of the participants were males.

Participant 1 was a 29 years old female PhD student who ultimately quit her incomplete studies. Participant 2 was a 43 years old male PhD student who was continuing his studies. Participant 3 was a 27 years old male Research Masters student who ultimately quit his incomplete studies. Participant 4 was a 24 years old female Coursework Masters student who was continuing her studies. Participant 5 was a 35 years old female Coursework Masters student who was continuing her studies. Participant 6 was a 33 years old female Mixed Mode Masters student who ultimately quit her incomplete studies. Participant 7 was a 29 years old female Coursework Masters student who ultimately quit her incomplete studies. Participant 8 was a 27 years old female PhD student who was continuing her studies.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study looked into the conception of delay of important academic tasks by the respondents. It entails the thoughts and ideas that the participants have, related to

the experience of serious procrastination. As thoughts, behaviors and cognitions of any experience co-occur; it is not usually possible to separate one from the other. However, in order to closely examine the primarily cognitive aspect of serious procrastination, narratives of the participants that heavily lean on the cognitions (thoughts, beliefs, and personal definitions of their acts) have been noted as cognitions related to serious procrastination. The master and superordinate themes that are marked as leaning toward the cognitive aspect, (this marking) does not purport them as purely cognitive; rather it makes the understanding of the participants' accounts more feasible. The master theme that answers the research question of this study is titled 'concept of procrastination: getting blurred and running away'. This master theme is discussed in the following section.

4.1 Concept of Procrastination : Getting Blurred and Running Away

The experience of serious procrastination stems from a sense of being overwhelmed by the task at hand and by not being able to take steps in the right direction to cope with one's overwhelmingness. As the task at hand was considered difficult to handle or overwhelming so participants experienced a difficulty in deciding where to start their important work and how to plan and manage their time in connection thereof. Their experience of not being able to decide and plan for the overwhelming task was followed by a feeling of even more angst as the participants were experiencing a state of indecision with respect to the most important decision they had to take. Therefore, the added angst, as experienced by the participants, became the main issue to be addressed here and now. Hence, the participants experienced a need to address this issue of heightened unease first instead of setting out to address the important task that has to be done. For this purpose, what participants experienced was, an effort to calm themselves down by doing any other activity that lessens the feeling of unease in them. Doing any other activity, may it be an entertaining one or just any other mundane one, temporarily shifts the attention of the participants away from the important task at hand. Hence this experience of putting away important task and doing something else temporarily absolves the participants of the necessity of taking a concrete decision toward solving their real problem or real important task; thereby giving some relief and calming participants down for some time.

In relation to the tendency of not deciding what readily needs to be done for the important task, and trying to calm down by putting away the important task, the participants also reported about ideation of external causation, a generalized experience of delay in their lives, and many negative consequences of this delay. Participants emphasized that most of the decisions of their lives are made outside of themselves; hence, the control over their lives lies somewhat away from them. Moreover, their lives are generally affected by the delaying of important tasks,

and they have suffered quite a lot of negative consequences because of this delay especially in their education. This master theme titled 'concept of procrastination: getting blurred and running away' has five superordinate themes under it *i.e.*

1. indecision,
2. calming down by putting away important thing,
3. control from outside oneself,
4. generalized delay affecting education more,
5. perceived consequences of delay.

These all themes correlate with each other on theoretical level as they all lean heavily toward the conceptual experience of serious procrastination as thought of by the participants. These superordinate themes are under the master theme of 'concept of procrastination: getting blurred and running away)' because these themes tend to loosely portray the participant's own conceptual map of serious procrastination as they tried to make sense of their delaying tendency.

'Indecision' (see table 1) is the first superordinate theme under the aforesaid master theme. It is a difficulty in deciding the suitable course of action for the next step in undertaking an important task at hand specifically, and in planning for life generally. It can take the form of difficulty in deciding what to do in order to finish the important task. This superordinate theme emerged as participants described what they thought about themselves in terms of planning and action.

TABLE 1: SUPERORDINATE THEME 'INDECISION', SMALL QUOTES ABOUT IT FROM THE PARTICIPANTS, AND FREQUENCY OF MENTIONING THOSE QUOTES

Participants	Small Quotes
1.	I cannot decide how to start, I Regret PhD
2.	I get blurred and don't know how to start, I am conflicted and not congruent
3.	Cannot follow (as) planned, My life is getting blurred
4.	–
5.	Maybe my choice is not okay
6.	Not good in planning, Wish I had more time
7.	totally blank when start, Like to organize but not able to
8.	–

'Calming down by putting away important thing' (see table 2) is the second superordinate theme under the master theme of the current study. After experiencing an overwhelming task and getting stressed by its ramifications, the participants reported the experience of an effort to put the idea of doing the important thing and the thing itself, away from their immediate consciousness. Thereby, forgetting what is needed to be done and activating a sort of mechanism of selective forgetting of the task that needs to be done. This selective forgetting is a way to immediately reduce anxiety and then the participants experienced a search for pleasure in order

to feel comfortable and at ease. This is aided by an experience of bogus optimism in terms of estimating the remaining time that one has for the completion of the important task.

TABLE 2: SUPERORDINATE THEME 'CALMING DOWN BY PUTTING AWAY IMPORTANT THINGS', SMALL QUOTES ABOUT IT FROM THE PARTICIPANTS, AND FREQUENCY OF MENTIONING THOSE QUOTES

Participants	Small Quotes
1.	I forget and put it away, I (try to) calm down
2.	–
3.	I give more importance to myself , I find pleasure-comfort and delay the uncomfortable, Don't worry
4.	(Over)confidence, I run away from problems
5.	But then I do not care, I thought that I have a lot of time, I feel tired
6.	I believe never mind, I can do later, I didn't take studies seriously, Can do this later
7.	I let go of it (studies), I do other things
8.	Bored, want to distract , at first I feel pressure, release stress by watching any movie, I let it (study) go

'Control from outside oneself' (see table 3) is the third superordinate theme under the master theme of current study. Participants experienced being out of sync with their life trajectories generally. They maintained a sense of external control over their life as one of the most crucial factors determining their life paths; may it be their family, or their luck, or any other external variable substantially controlling their lives.

TABLE 3: SUPERORDINATE THEME 'CONTROL FROM OUTSIDE ONESELF', SMALL QUOTES ABOUT IT FROM THE PARTICIPANTS, AND FREQUENCY OF MENTIONING THOSE QUOTES

Participants	Small Quotes
1.	It was just luck, Ghost not let me do studies
2.	–
3.	I need an external reason to go do a work, By luck
4.	–
5.	Everything has to have an external reason
6.	Husband said it's okay to leave my studies
7.	–
8.	forcefully joined (university preparation)

'Generalized delay affecting education more' (see table 4) is the third superordinate theme under the master theme of current study. Delaying has been expressed by most participants as a generalized tendency, which results in postponement of most of their important tasks in many different areas of their lives. However, they find the delay of academic tasks especially a bigger problem than other dilatory tendency.

TABLE 4: SUPERORDINATE THEME 'GENERALIZED DELAY AFFECTING EDUCATION MORE', SMALL QUOTES ABOUT IT FROM THE PARTICIPANTS, AND FREQUENCY OF MENTIONING THOSE QUOTES

Participants	Small Quotes
1.	I also delay in my personal life, I've never heard about the word procrastination
2.	Every single time I delay and don't do anything, First time heard about the word procrastination
3.	I do not know what procrastination means, Study and waking up and work and sleeping all get delayed, I always delay, I have been delaying everything since I was young
4.	I procrastinate a lot on studying
5.	I Procrastinate a lot, Not heard about procrastination, Biggest problem of life, Everything is delayed
6.	Biggest mistake, Delayed my thesis every time I wanted to start it, Procrastination happens to my work also
7.	It is a big problem for me in education
8.	Last minute work is procrastination, I have a habit of doing last minute work, All tasks last minute

'Perceived consequences of delay' (see table 5) is the fourth superordinate theme under the master theme of current study. It was experienced by participants as a sense of loss owing to their delaying tendency. Their sense of loss in terms of their education was most evident.

TABLE 5: SUPERORDINATE THEME 'PERCEIVED CONSEQUENCES OF DELAY', SMALL QUOTES ABOUT IT FROM THE PARTICIPANTS, AND FREQUENCY OF MENTIONING THOSE QUOTES

Participants	Small Quotes
1.	I still have not defended my proposal in even in 6th semester
2.	–
3.	Pay more fines as delay compensation, Suffering
4.	–
5.	Work gets worse or not complete, I failed last semester , Weight increase, My name is called and I get embarrassed
6.	Couldn't finish my Masters, Registered twice but twice incomplete, Still couldn't do research proposal, Cannot finish my work
7.	I could not complete my studies
8.	Haven't defended proposal, Bad impression, I miss deadlines

As outlined earlier, serious academic procrastination could be seen as a difficulty in deciding the proper course of action in order to complete the important education task at hand. After not knowing what to do with the important academic task at hand, serious academic procrastination can be seen as a way of continuously running away from that important educational task or any other uncomfortable task. This loop of running away and trying to focus out the important task may

provide temporary relief from the unease of doing the task but ultimately result in a general tendency to avoid life and educational goals and sometimes causes irreparable damage to a person's life, especially a person's education.

The current finding is a rather novel take on the phenomenon of serious procrastination as only recent studies mentioned its presence and the need for its further exploration (Rebetez *et al.*, 2015). Most other ideas present in literature, focus on one specific aspect as the cause of procrastination. However, the current findings can be seen as a cognitive process outline approach and thus multiple cognitions can be seen responsible in culminating into serious academic procrastination. Some aspects of the current finding can be considered in line with the notion of "low frustration tolerance" model by Pychyl and Flett (2012).

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