CHAPTER 9

Delaying Things and Feeling Bad About It? A Norm-Based Approach to Procrastination

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INTRODUCTION

As we started to write this chapter Clarry Lay, well-known researcher on procrastination and self-proclaimed procrastinator, published a book titled *Procrastinators (and Others) Can Still Get to Heaven: A Guide to Directed Everyday Living* (Lay, 2015). In addition to being a masterwork for procrastination self-help, the title is a statement to how we, at least in North America, view procrastinators. Perhaps characterizing procrastinators as demonized individuals who may not reach heaven is harsh, but there is some truth to the idea behind his title: most of us would agree that procrastination is a "bad thing" that we should not normally do and that we *should* feel like a "bad person" for doing it.

For the most part, procrastination has been investigated from a personality perspective, conceptualized often as a disposition that some people have toward procrastinating, chronic procrastinators (Lay, 1986; Sirois, Melia-Gordon, & Pychyl, 2003; Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995). The goal of this chapter is to examine procrastination from a situational perspective, as opposed to a person perspective, and reflecting an instance when we fail to regulate our behavior in order to pursue a desired socially valued goal. Specifically, this chapter examines a key situational determinant of behavior, the norms we perceive in our social environment, and how they may impact our thoughts, emotions, and behavior in the context of procrastination. We offer a norm-based approach to procrastination focusing on experiences of shame and guilt, and provide some preliminary evidence illustrating the potential value of this approach, and discuss the implications of this approach for well-being and health. Complementing personality perspectives, our approach reveals that the causes of procrastination may lie in the normally

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occurring and functional influence of the social norms that individuals de-rive from their social environment. It further suggests that the robustness of procrastination habits to individual-level intervention may occur because social normative pressures counteract the effect of these interventions as soon as the person resumes their normal activities.

PROCRASTINATION AS SELF-REGULATION FAILURE

Humans have a unique ability to control their inner states, thoughts, and emotions in the pursuit of a valued goal within a given time frame. This ability to self-regulate allows people to meet goals that fulfill expectations shaped by social norms, which they have acquired through the socializa-tion process. For example, Dave might start early September planning with his kids for their Halloween costumes. That would allow him time to visit stores, such as used-clothing stores and costume stores, early, before other parents, and select items that would be best suited for his kids' costumes. By the time Halloween comes along Dave would go trick-or-treating with his kids. His ability to fulfill normative expectations would transform into positive social cues, such as smiles and praises from the neighbors toward him and his kids as they trick-or-treat. With these praises Dave and his kids would experience positive social emotions, such as pride.

In an idealized world of self-regulation, never would we delay our com-mitments to valued tasks in order to do things that are easier or more fun. Unfortunately, in reality, most, if not all of us, will on some occasions fail at self-regulating our inner states, thoughts, and emotions, and delay the pursuit of an intended goal. Social norms provide a crucial source of information that help to signal such failures of self-regulation. They help people assess what is normally expected for any given goal pursued, both in terms of re-quirements for the goal (e.g., what it should look like) and expected timeline (e.g., how long should this take). When we fail to meet these requirements and/or timelines, we transgress social norms. For example, Dave might put off planning for his kids' Halloween costumes until October 31st in the morning. By the time he gets an idea together, without the input of his kids, he heads to the stores to find them out of the more well-suited items for original costumes. Not having a plan ahead of time further delays him in getting his kids ready to go trick-or-treating, and once they are ready, the costumes are rather poorly put together. His failure to self-regulate to fulfill normative expectations will lead to negative social cues, such as frowns, a lack of praise by the neighbors, and an awkward experience for his kids

who can perceive some disappointment in the faces of the neighbors as they open the door and see them in costumes that were put together at the last minute. Due to these social cues, Dave and his kids will not experience a rise in positive emotions commonly associated with trick-or-treating. Instead, they will most likely experience an aversive emotional state caused by the transgression of social norms, characterized by social emotions such shame and guilt, which have important implications for well-being, especially when experienced repeatedly (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). For example, proneness to experience shame is linked to depression and increased problematic coping behaviors, such as alcohol consumption.

At the root of these instances of self-regulation failures is a focus on regulating immediate affect; seeking pleasure now, typically at a later cost (see Sirois & Pychyl, 2013; Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000). Dave may be avoiding the effort needed to get his children to participate in planning their costumes at the end of a long hard day at work by doing a host of activities that are easier or more fun, from watching hockey on TV to spending time playing with his kids by building a pillow fort. As with other forms of self-regulation failures, a key component of procrastination then is an in-the-moment failure to focus on the long-term benefits, and instead letting short-term needs guide behavior (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). From this perspective, procrastination can be conceptualized as instances of *procrastinatory behavior*. This approach to procrastination is well suited to a social psychological perspective, which places emphasis on situational determinants of behaviors. Moreover, this approach may complement the more dominant personality-focused approach to understanding procrastination. Instead of asking "why is Dave a procrastinator?" the focus is on how sociocultural forces are shaping procrastinatory behavior and its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. A situational perspective also makes it easier to think about sequences of situations, how one instance of procrastinatory behavior may motivate or demotivate future instances of procrastination and thus affect health and well-being.

PROCRASTINATORY BEHAVIOR FROM A NORMS PERSPECTIVE

Social norms are cognitive representations of what relevant others, often called a reference group, would typically think, feel, or do in a given situation, which people use as reference points to guide and assess their own thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Turner, 1991). Once acquired through

social learning, the norms can be retrieved from memory automatically and influence our actions whether or not others are present (Aarts, Dijksterhuis, & Custers, 2003; Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008). By using the term "automatic," we mean that this process may occur without conscious intent and awareness; we do not mean that the influence of norms is uncontrollable or demands no attention (see Bargh, 1994; Jacobson, Mortensen, & Cialdini, 2011). Thus, social norms motivate the self-regulation of both private and public actions by informing individuals of what is likely to be either adaptive or problematic behavior in a given situation.

For the most part the influence of norms operates through social comparison (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Prentice, 2000). Instead of relying on an in-depth analysis to determine the goals that are best suited to our current circumstances, as well as the best-suited course of action and the optimal time to pursue them, we can simply turn to social norms, look at what we think others do or should do in similar situations and do the same thing. People go along with (observed or verbally communicated) normative ways of behaving because, in part, they rely on other people's behavior as a source of information to help them define social reality and act in an adaptive way (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Turner, 1991).

Social norms will typically evolve in order to facilitate the interaction of individuals with others in social groups (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Turner, 1991). Our ability to adhere to normative expectations is key to fulfilling our fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Social affiliation and exclusion are assumed to play a central role in the motivational component of normative influence (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Turner 1991). They can be associated with the actual presence of others, such as being congratulated by or receiving disparaging comments from another person. Social norms can also be associated with the imagined or implied presence of others, such as recalling being congratulated by or receiving disparaging comments from another person (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Turner, 1991). Social norms can thus have a motivational impact on the actions of individuals through the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. As other socially learned contingencies, these expectations can dynamically change as a function of situational demands and repeated experiences (Giguère, Vaswani, & Newby-Clark, 2015; Vaswani, Newby-Clark, & Giguère, 2015; see Prentice, 2000).

A dominant assumption, which can be traced to early social influence research (cf, Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), is that people learn that adherence

to norms will lead to social affiliation and positive social emotions (e.g., pride), while transgression of norms will lead to social exclusion and negative social emotions (e.g., shame) (see Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Leary, 2000; Rossano, 2012). Thus, social emotions play an integral role in the comparative process by which social norms influence our behavior and well-being.

By directing the self-regulation process, norms are a primary contributor to the well-being of these groups and the people comprising them (Heine, 2012; Turner, 1991). For example, although instant gratification may have been an adaptive strategy at certain points in human evolution (e.g., when much uncertainty resided as to when food would be next available), the emergence of social networks and collaborative efforts toward the satisfaction of primary needs make the principle of reciprocity a more functional option. Collaboration among individuals in this regard is essential to the well-being of all. *In a well-functioning group, self-regulation failures will typically transgress social norms, because if they were normative, that is, if the majority of individuals did such behaviors most of the time, the vitality of groups would be jeopardized.* Self-regulation failures are therefore often a challenge to a well-functioning group. They have, by definition, long-term costs for the person and his or her community. For example, procrastination may prevent one from fulfilling the demands of the norm of reciprocity, a norm which would benefit the group as a whole by facilitating interactions among individuals and fostering support.

When engaging in procrastinatory behavior, people avoid pursuing an intended goal and instead engage in behaviors that are easier and/or more pleasurable. In most situations, this course of action will lead them to transgress one or more expectations set by social norms. These failures may affect the requirements of the goal they intended to pursue (e.g., poor Halloween costumes) and/or the timeliness of the goal completion (e.g., starting to trick-or-treat late). *As such, procrastinatory behavior is a form of self-regulation failure that leads to the transgression of social norms.* Thus, procrastinatory behavior should typically be met by cues of social devaluation and rejection that are actually communicated by others following a transgression or automatically activated from learned social contingencies (Giguère et al., 2015; Vaswani et al., 2015).

When people are repeatedly unable to fulfill normative expectations, others around them will devalue them as a person. This devaluation is certainly one commonly ascribed to procrastinators, who because of their procrastination habit, cannot be trusted to fulfill the commitments tied to normative expectations. People use the normative behavior of others to give them

information as to who they are as a person. Procrastinatory behavior communicates a variety of less than flattering personal attributes that are commonly associated with procrastinators: that the person has low self-control, poor time-management skills, lack of consideration for others, is lazy, and that he or she struggles to delay gratification and is likely to pursue impulses as they arise. Indeed, past work that observed that procrastination is associated with low self-control (Ferrari & Emmons, 1995; Sirois, 2004). Procrastination may hamper the ability of individuals to fulfill their obligations and commitments made to others, making them less valuable from a cooperation perspective as a valuable person to affiliate with (van Eerde, 2003).

Procrastinatory behaviors give rise to the type of norm transgressions that signal that the procrastinator is a "bad person" to associate with because they will struggle to consistently fulfill his or her commitments and obligations to others, such as fulfilling the obligations of reciprocity. Indeed, procrastination is frequently depicted as an irrational act of putting things off for "no good reason," particularly by people who do not think of themselves as procrastinators (Burka & Yuen, 1983; Ferrari et al., 1995). The habit of procrastinating is viewed as self-defeating by lowering the quality of performance because one ends up with less time to work (Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Ellis & Knaus, 1977). Others view procrastination as a self-destructive strategy, akin to self-handicapping such as when people withhold effort so as to give themselves an excuse for any future poor performance (Jones & Berglas, 1978; Fee & Tangney, 2000). People will often refer to the unnecessary stress that procrastinators expose themselves to by repeatedly completing tasks at the last minute, and more generally to the burdens on procrastinators' physical or mental health (Boice, 1996; Flett, Blankstein, & Martin, 1995; Sirois, 2007, 2014). In general, people who regularly procrastinate are often viewed as being lazy and sloth (Schouwenburg & Lay, 1995). Ascribing a sin deemed so problematic that is a "deadly sin" to people who frequently engage in procrastinatory behavior clearly denotes the level of social devaluation tied to procrastinatory behavior. It is no surprise that historically procrastination has had a negative moral connotation; it implies not living up to societal expectations (Ferrari et al., 1995; Sabini & Silver, 1982).

"FEELING BAD" ABOUT PROCRASTINATING

The way in which people assess whether their behavior is problematic or not is inextricably shaped by the norms they derive from the social groups to which they belong (Giguère, Lalonde, & Taylor, 2014; see Turner, 1991).

When their actions lead to the transgression of social norms, people will typically "feel bad" (Leary, 2000). They experience different types of negative emotions when they transgress norms. Among these, social emotions hold important and distinct implications in terms of their motivational impact on self-regulation (Giguère et al., 2014; see Leary, 2000; Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Social emotions have their genesis in social norms, which are acquired through the interaction of individuals with their social groups (Turner, 1991). These emotions occur as a result of real, anticipated, remembered, or imagined encounters with other people in response to events that have implications for how one is perceived by others, particularly one's viability as a social participant in relation to other people (Leary, 2000). When people adhere to norms, they will typically experience cues of acceptance and affiliation, which leads to positive social emotional experiences, such as feeling proud. When people transgress social norms, they will typically experience cues of being devalued and of rejection, which leads to negative social emotional experiences, such as shame.

Two of these negative social emotions, shame and guilt, hold important and distinct implications in terms of their motivational impact on self-regulation (Giguère et al., 2014; Fee & Tangney, 2000; see Tangney & Dearing, 2002). A key distinguishing feature of guilt and shame revolves around a difference in cognitive appraisal of the perceived causes of transgressions. When people perceive that the key cause of a transgression lies in the specifics of one of their behaviors (i.e., the cause is a "bad behavior"), rather than to some external cause, they are more likely to experience feelings of guilt. Feelings of guilt typically motivate the reparation of the transgression and, more generally, facilitate self-regulation (Giguère et al., 2014; see Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). When the perceived cause of a transgression extends beyond the specifics of the behavior to the self as defective, unworthy, or abnormal and people attribute the cause to a stable negative characteristics (i.e., the reason is that they are a "bad person"), they are more likely to experience shame. We experience shame when we think our way of being somehow deviated from what we think that people should normally be in a given situation. Shame is often associated with a motivational tendency to withdraw, which in turn is associated with negative outcomes in terms of health and well-being (e.g., increased alcohol consumption; Dearing, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2005; Giguère et al., 2014).

If procrastination is a form of norm transgressing self-regulation failure, then it should be associated with experiences of guilt and shame. Indeed, past research has examined and observed a relationship among shame, guilt, and procrastination (Blunt & Pychyl, 2005; Fee & Tangney, 2000). The relationship of procrastination to shame and guilt holds important implications for procrastination and its impact on health and well-being. When resulting in feelings of guilt, procrastination should, in theory, motivate the person to repair any issues created by the unnecessary delay of a task, and it should motivate self-regulation overall and thus decrease future procrastination. When shame is experienced, however, the outcomes in terms of procrastination may be less positive. Past work suggests that shame will motivate social withdrawal and overall hamper the person's self-regulation, resulting in negative health and well-being outcomes.

Guilt and Procrastination

The notion that feelings of guilt are associated with procrastination is a long-standing one. Many theoretical approaches to procrastination frequently make reference to procrastination-related guilt (Blunt & Pychyl, 2005; Burka & Yuen, 1983; Ferrari, 1991b; Ferrari & Beck, 1998; Lavoie & Pychyl, 2001). Pychyl, Lee, Thibodeau and Blunt (2000) used an experience sampling approach to examine, among other aspects of emotion and motivation, the link between instances of procrastinatory behavior and guilt. Their results revealed that when people indicated they were procrastinating, they were more likely to also report experiencing guilt.

The link between the act of procrastinating and feelings of guilt is commonly framed as a transgression of norms. For example, Panek (2014) observed that procrastination through unscheduled media use was associated with increased feelings of guilt. Exploring the issue of situational procrastination more in depth, Reinecke, Hartmann, and Eden (2014) observed that procrastination through media use (e.g., online gaming) brought about by self-regulation failure led to a significant increase in reported situational guilt. In sum, guilt appears to be tied to procrastinatory behavior, and this relationship is explained, at least in part, by norm transgression.

Shame and Procrastination

Although from a procrastination perspective the relationship between guilt and procrastination is a long-standing one (Burka & Yuen, 1983; Ferrari, 1991b; Ferrari & Beck, 1998; Lavoie & Pychyl, 2001), from a social emotional perspective, however, shame may play a more significant role in

procrastination. Even though people may have experiences of guilt over specific acts of situational procrastination (e.g., feelings of regret and remorse over not having finished a particular project at work), the motives underlying the act of procrastination and the propensity to chronically procrastinate may be more closely linked to feelings of shame.

Shame results from the perception that the cause of the transgression is rooted in a negative stable aspect of the person. It results from the actual, imagined, or anticipation of cues of social rejection. The type of transgression created by procrastination is one amenable to attribute the cause of the transgression to a character flaw, to be viewed as a "bad person," and to be met with cues of social rejection.

At the core of the influence of social norms is the principle of reciprocity (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). From a social exchange perspective, a procrastinator will struggle to fulfill obligations set by the principle of reciprocity. Thus, the type of norm transgression brought on by procrastinatory behavior may readily lead to the perception that the transgressor cannot be trusted to fulfill his or her commitments to others, including being unable to reciprocate normative expectations. This type of transgression signals to others that the person is unable to fully participate in the exchange process involved in the maintenance of the norms of a group. These transgressions should thus result in concerns about being negatively evaluated by others, such as actual, imagined, and anticipated cues of social rejection. As we rely on normative expectations to predict others' behavior, people who procrastinate make it challenging to predict their behavior across multiple domains and in multiple areas of their lives (e.g., work, family). It would thus be functional that procrastinatory behavior gives rise to shame, which would signal to the person that others might view them as a "bad person"; specifically as someone who should not be trusted to fulfill his or her commitment on time, and thus as someone who may not fulfill the obligations of reciprocity. From this perspective, people are more likely to experience shame following instances of procrastinatory behavior compared to guilt. Supporting this conclusion, Fee and Tangney (2000) observed that proneness to experience shame was associated with procrastination tendencies, while guilt proneness was not.

When people experience shame, they will often socially withdraw, including disengaging from social norms, creating a situation in which the signaling of norm transgression simply may lead people to dismiss the normative message (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Moreover, in such situations, people may struggle to cope with the experience of shame. If they

frequently experience these situations, they may turn to problematic behaviors to escape from the experience of shame. For example, if Dave experienced shame following the Halloween mishap, he might start to avoid his neighbors and withdraw from his community. Moreover, shame increases the likelihood he seeks problematic coping behaviors, such alcohol consumption that can lower self-awareness (Dearing et al., 2005).

The coping engendered by feelings of shame may very well contribute to a dynamic relationship between shame and procrastination, such that instances of procrastination lead to the experience of shame and shame, in turn, motivates procrastination as a way to cope with the anticipation of being rejected. Indeed, numerous studies link procrastination to social evaluative concerns. Procrastination often represents a defense mechanism motivated by efforts to avoid and self-protect when people fear the possibility of negative evaluation of others (Fee & Tangney, 2000). Supporting this view, Ferrari (1991a) observed that procrastinators were more likely to avoid a task when their performance could be known publicly. Ferrari and Beck (1998) similarly noted that procrastinators were more likely to use fraudulent excuses to try to cover up their unnecessary delay of tasks, and then feel guilty about doing so. In addition, Ferrari (1991b) reported a link between procrastination and social anxiety, suggesting concerns over others evaluations and a desire for approval.

Fee and Tangney (2000) further observed that shame proneness moderated the relationship between procrastination and socially prescribed perfectionism, which can be defined as the perception that *others impose* unrealistic expectations of perfection *on the self* (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The role of shame in procrastination thus appears to be tied to the social perception of procrastination. In sum, people often procrastinate because they fear the possible negative evaluation of others about who they are, and procrastinating often leads to a type of norm transgression whose perceived cause is a character flaw of the person. Such a dynamic relationship is supported by work observing that chronic procrastination is associated with a proneness to experience shame, while it is not related to a proneness to experience guilt (Fee & Tangney, 2000).

A NORM-BASED APPROACH TO PROCRASTINATION AND EMOTIONS

The social norms we derive from our social environment motivates both private and public actions by informing individuals of what is likely to be adaptive or problematic behavior in a given situation (Cialdini

et al., 1991; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Social emotions provide instrumental feedback as to whether our actions align or not with social norms. More importantly, when our actions depart from social norms, two types of social emotions signal distinctive feedback and motivational tendencies (e.g., Giguère et al., 2014). Guilt results from the perception that a specific behavior caused us to transgress social norms, while shame is experienced when we perceived that a stable self-ascribed negative trait is at the root of our transgression of norms.

The direct motivational impact of emotions on behavior has received much attention. A classic example of this type of influence is fear motivating flight at the sight of a bear. In the case of guilt, it has been associated with approach motivation to attempt to mend the "bad behavior." For example, Dave could apologize to his kids and read their favorite storybook with them before going to bed. Shame, on the other hand, has been associated with withdrawal motivation generated by the perception that others see the person as a "bad person." For example, Dave could let his partner get the kids ready for bed, and hide in the basement to watch football on the TV.

Emotions can also have an indirect influence on motivation by their impact on cognitions (Forgas, 2000). Negative emotional responses can motivate a reflective process that results in motivational change (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). Through this process, the experience of social emotions can have important motivational impact. For example, when people feel guilty, they will often take steps to amend the transgression that generated their guilt and often create intentions to avoid that such transgression reoccurs. Continuing with our previous example of Dave, he could amend his guilt by taking steps to "make it up" to his kids, such as by planning ahead a trip to an amusement park. If Dave was primarily experiencing shame, he might withdraw from other activities with his kids and in the neighborhood.

To recap our current approach to procrastination, it is assumed to be a type of self-regulation failure which results in the transgression of sociocultural norms. The type of transgression created is one likely to be attributed to something bad about the person and to lead to the experience of shame. Together the attribution process and resulting shame make salient evaluation concerns, specifically concerns that the person will be socially devaluated, and motivates social withdrawal. In the next section, we report some preliminary work that attempts to examine the motivational impact of negative social-emotional experiences in the context of procrastination.

Exploring a Norm-Based Approach to Procrastination and Social Emotions

To date, there has been little research examining procrastination specifically from the lens of social norms. To address this gap, the aim of this study was to explore the perception of instances of procrastinatory behavior as norm transgressing and that this perception is associated to the experience of shame and guilt, as well as some of the sociocognitive motivational outcomes of these emotions. The key signal that the person is a "bad person" is that they are delaying an effortful task for an easier one. Thus, we expected that as the effort demands of a delayed task increased and as the effort demands of an alternate task (pursued instead of the delayed one) decreased, individuals should experience an increased perception that they are transgressing social norms, increased feelings of shame, and increased concerns that they are negatively evaluated as a person.

Method

A sample of 126 undergraduate students was recruited to participate in this study (61% women, mean age 21). After providing consent, participants completed a short survey with demographic information and trait procrastination. Next, participants were asked to recall the most recent time they postponed or delayed a task (or set of tasks) related to their courses and to describe this event in an open-ended format. This open-ended question was followed by a second, asking participants to describe any task(s) they did instead of the task (or set of tasks) related to their courses. Finally, a third question focused on the possible cause(s) for the delay.

Following the open-ended question, participants completed different measures tied to the main relevant constructs, among which they completed items developed to assess the degree of norm transgression and their emotional experience. Finally, participants were debriefed and provided with their compensation (either in the form of course credit or $10).

Task effort. Four items were used to assess the level of effort required to complete the delayed task (or grouping of related tasks) and the alternate task (or grouping of related tasks) (e.g., "The tasks(s) required effort to complete"; "The task(s) required attention to complete"; delayed task $\alpha = 0.89$; alternate task $\alpha = 0.83$). The ratings were done on a 10-point scale (1 *not at all* to 10 *very much*). The items were averaged to create a measure of required effort for the delayed task(s) and for the alternate task(s), with greater values indicating more effort demand.

Norm transgression. A 10-item measure developed to assess the extent to which a behavior transgresses perceived social norms (Giguère & Lalonde, 2015) was adapted for the current study to assess the extent to which people perceived their procrastination transgressed social norms (e.g., "In that situation, I spent more time on other activities than I should have instead of doing the task I was supposed to do"; "Spending my time the way I did was compatible with what is normally viewed as the appropriate work or study habits in that type of situation"). Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 7-point scale (1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*). The items were averaged to create a single measure of norm transgression conflict ($\alpha = 0.80$). Greater values are indicative of greater transgression.

Social emotions. Guilt and shame were assessed using items adapted from the state self-conscious emotion scale (Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994; shame, 5 items, $\alpha = 0.87$; e.g., "I felt small"; guilt, 5 items, $\alpha = 0.89$, e.g., "I felt remorse, regret"). Participants rated their agreement with each item on a 9-point scale (1 "*I did not feel this way at all*" to 9 "*I felt this way very strongly*"). The items were averaged to create single measures of shame and guilt. Greater values are indicative of greater reported shame and guilt.

Fear of negative evaluation. The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (Brief FNE; Leary, 1983) was included to assess the extent to which people experienced evaluation concerns (12 items; e.g., "I worry about what kind of impression I make on people"; $\alpha = 0.81$). The instructions were adapted to inquire about the concerns people had about being evaluated because of the event they had just described.

Results

Norm transgression. A linear regression examined the effect of effort demands of the delayed and alternate task on the perception of norm transgression to examine the notion that delaying an effortful task for something easier is perceived as norm transgressing. Norm transgression was regressed on the main effects of effort of the delayed and alternate tasks, and their interaction. The regression revealed a main effect of effort of the delayed task, $\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$, and main effect of effort of the alternate task, $\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$. These main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction of effort demand for the delayed and alternate task, $\beta = -0.33$, $p < 0.001$. The two-way interaction was examined by level of the effort demand of the delayed task (lower $= -1SD$; higher $= +1SD$) using simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). At higher levels of effort of the delayed task, the perception of norm transgression decreased as the effort demands
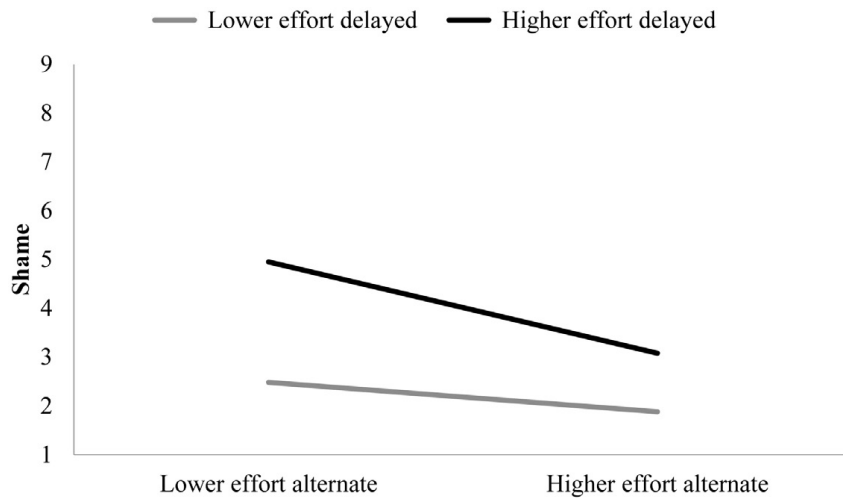
of the alternate task increased, $\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.001$, while the perception of norm transgression did not vary as a function of the level of effort demand of the alternate task at lower effort demand of the delayed task, $\beta = -0.04$, $p > 0.10$.

Shame and guilt. A mixed-linear model (generated using the lme4 R package; Bates, Maechler, & Bolker, 2011) was used to examine the influence of effort of the delayed and alternate task on the experience of guilt and shame. Type of emotions was treated as a within-subject variable, and effort of the delayed and alternate tasks were treated as continuous between-subject variables.
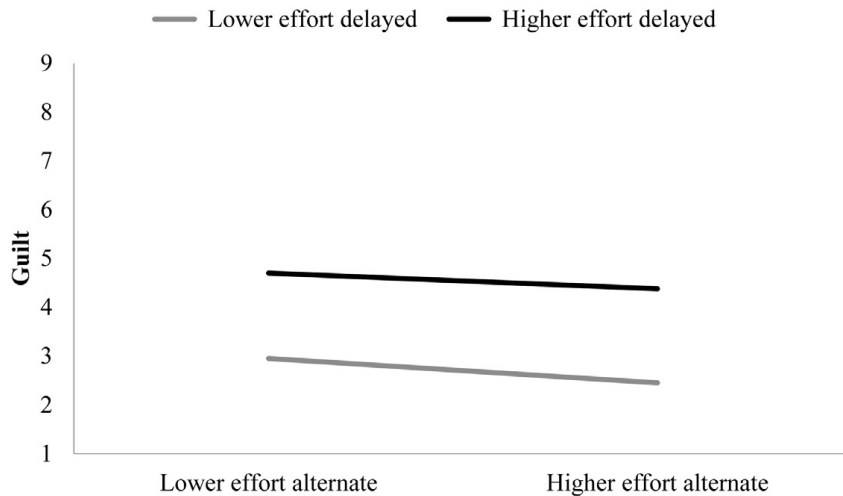
The model (effort of delayed task × effort of alternate task × emotion type) revealed significant main effects for the effort of the delayed task, $F(1, 121) = 26.35$, $p < 0.001$, and for effort of the alternate task, $F(1, 121) = 14.36$, $p < 0.001$, along with a nonsignificant main effect of type of emotions, $F(1, 121) = 2.92$, $p = 0.180$. These main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction between effort of delayed task and effort of alternate task, $F(1, 121) = 10.43$, $p < 0.001$, a nonsignificant interaction of delayed task effort and type of emotions, $F(1, 121) = 1.84$, $p = 0.355$, and a significant interaction of alternate task effort and types of emotions, $F(1, 121) = 7.03$, $p = 0.018$. All these effects were qualified by a significant three-way interaction between effort of delayed task, effort of alternate task, and type of emotion, $F(1, 121) = 8.02$, $p = 0.011$.

The three-way interaction was examined by type of emotions using simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). Analyses for shame were done controlling for guilt, while analyses focusing on guilt were done controlling for shame. Effort of delayed and alternate tasks were fixed at +1 SD for higher effort demand and −1 SD for lower effort demand. As depicted in Fig. 9.1, controlling for guilt, at higher effort demand of the delayed task as the effort demands of the alternate task increased the experience of shame decreased, $\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.001$. By contrast, at lower effort demand of the delayed task the effort demands of the alternate task did not influence the experience of shame, $\beta = -0.11$, $p = 0.567$, which was overall low. As depicted in Fig. 9.2, controlling for shame, the effort demands of the alternate tasks did not influence the experience of guilt at both lower and higher demands of the delayed task, respectively $\beta = -0.19$, $\beta = -0.14$, $p > 0.10$. Overall, the experience of guilt was greater for delayed tasks that required a higher level of effort compared to those requiring lower levels of effort.

Fear of negative evaluation. As with norm transgression, a linear regression was conducted to examine the effect of effort demands of the delayed

Figure 9.1 *Shame as function of level of effort demands of the delayed task and the alternate task.*

Figure 9.2 *Guilt as function of level of effort demands of the delayed task and the alternate task.*

and alternate task on the fear of being negatively evaluated because of the delay. The regression revealed a nonsignificant main effect of effort of the delayed task, $\beta = 0.18$, $p > 0.10$, and main effect of effort of the alternate task, $\beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.05$. These main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction of effort demand for the delayed and alternate task, $\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$. The two-way interaction was examined by level of the effort demand of the delayed task (lower $= -1SD$; higher $= +1SD$) using simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991). At higher levels of effort of the delayed task concerns to be negatively evaluated decreased as the effort demands of

the alternate task increased, $\beta = -0.51, p < 0.001$, while concerns of negative evaluation did not vary as a function of the level of effort demand of the alternate task at lower effort demand of the delayed task, $\beta = 0.06, p > 0.10$.

What Can We Learn From a Norm-Based Approach to Procrastination?

This study provides a preliminary view of procrastinatory behavior from a social norms perspective by examining the sociocognitive and emotional responses to delaying a task. In support of the notion that delaying effortful tasks by doing tasks that are easier is often perceived as norm transgressing, participants reported the greatest experience of norm transgression at higher effort demands of the delayed task and lower effort demands of the alternate task. More importantly, the results suggest that the type of norm transgression created by such discrepancy between the effort demands of a delayed task and those of an alternate task is conducive to experiencing shame and to become concerned about being negatively evaluated by others.

These results are further supported by previous work from Fee and Tangney (2000), who observed that increased proneness to experience shame was associated with a greater likelihood of procrastinating. Fee and Tangney further argued that procrastination may be used by people experiencing shame as a way of coping with the negative experience of shame. For example, self-handicapping by delaying a task may help buffer potential negative evaluations of others that the task was poorly done (Ferrari, 1991c). Thus, a rather problematic dynamic process may lead people who procrastinate to experience shame, which then increases their likelihood to procrastinate, and so on. Such a dynamic process also concords with a long-standing view of procrastination as a challenging habit to address (Ferrari et al., 1995). If the joint experiences of procrastination and shame are rooted in learned social normative responses, as proposed by the current approach, it would further make sense that procrastination is challenging to address, particularly at an individual-by-individual level.

MANAGING BAD FEELINGS FROM PROCRASTINATION

Our sociocultural perspective on procrastination suggests that managing negative feelings stemming from procrastinatory behavior may be integral for avoiding a negative loop between procrastination and shame, which could lead to multiple negative consequences for individuals in terms of

their well–being and health. As previously discussed, Fee and Tangney (2000) placed an emphasis on managing social evaluation concerns as central to experience of procrastination, particularly in the context of social emo–tions such as shame. Our current proposed approach, as well as the data previously presented, are in accord with Fee and Tangney's conclusion. The next sections aim to present some of the more dysfunctional and func–tional strategies that may be used to manage social emotions associated with procrastination.

Managing Poorly

Fee and Tangney (2000) focus on the notion of self–protection, specifically they focus on the concept of *self-handicapping* afforded by procrastination as a strategy to avoid having to face further negative evaluations of others. By delaying a task, people may attempt to forgo any potential negative evalua–tion of others, that is, "[…] people engage in frequent, habitual, or chronic patterns of procrastination that are self-defeating in the long run, in order to avoid experiences of shame and humiliation in the short run" (p. 171). Self–handicapping is a self-protective mechanism. In essence, people "self–handicap" by creating situation-based obstacles to high performance (e.g., inadequate preparation, lack of sleep, alcohol use) in order to preserve the perception of high ability in the face of failure (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Intentionally or not, people often self–handicap as a means of creating an external cause for their poor performance. Chronic procrastination is one common form of self-handicapping, in that the procrastinator can blame poor performance on "not having enough time" to do the task as well as they could have, under more favorable circumstances. This strategy allows attributions for failure to remain external to the self, thus serving a self–protective function (Ferrari, 1991c).

The withdrawal motivational tendencies associated with shame are well known (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In the context of procrastination, such a motivational tendency may manifest itself through attempts to *hide or mask procrastinatory behaviors*. This strategy is quite distinct from the self–handi–capping one, in which the delay has to be acknowledged and often shared publicly to justify the poor performance on a task. In this case, the goal is to keep private the fact that the person delayed a task. For example, Dave could "cut corners" and use duck tape to fix a part of a costume to one of his child's arm, or neck instead of using appropriately designed glue. The end result may be to hide some of the delays in getting the costumes orga–nized, however there may be later consequences to this delay, for example,

if the duck tape leaves an abrasion mark on his kid's body. The costs of this strategy may affect most the well-being of the person, particularly giving rise to stress and social anxiety that one's shameful act will become known to others. The impact may also be observable in terms of the completion of the delayed task, for which withdrawal can be rather counterproductive. By socially withdrawing, people may be less likely to rely on the social support of others in completing the task they delayed, which may further prevent them from completing the task they already delayed.

From the current sociocultural perspective, an interesting novel view in terms of managing negative emotions associated with procrastinatory behavior may be to *normalize* it. At the forefront, people may change their normative reference point to now perceive that many people engage in delay of effortful task. This view is consistent with research demonstrating that procrastination is associated with low self-compassion and that increases in self-compassion may reduce procrastination (Sirois, 2014). Self-compassion includes a normative, common humanity component which involves acknowledging that one's shortcomings and failures are not unique and are shared by others (Neff, 2003). However, a change in the normative reference point could also be associated with biased cognitive processes, such as the confirmatory bias, which could lead procrastinators to pay increased attention to instances during which others close to them also engage in procrastination.

The end result of this strategy may be rather problematic by altering the perceived norms about task completion and work habits. As discussed previously, people rely on social norms to assess whether their behavior is problematic or not. Repeated attempts to normalize one's delay of intended tasks may lead people to perceive less restrictive norms about task completion and work habits. These altered norms may change how people assess their own behavior, experiencing less and less negative emotional responses to delays. From one perspective, this may be beneficial to the extent that excessive negative emotions surrounding procrastination may contribute to greater stress and further task disengagement as a means of coping with these feelings (Sirois, 2014; Sirois & Pychyl, 2013; Sirois & Kitner, 2015). However, if we consider the motivational value of negative feelings for changing behavior, then these altered norms may reduce delay-related emotional responses below the threshold for which they are functional. Such a dysfunctional response may contribute to further increase procrastination habits in the long term. In addition, these changes in normative perceptions can come with changes in cognitions regarding

procrastination habits. For example, procrastinators can point out that if one puts in the same amount of work on the project, it does not matter whether this is done early or late; or they might argue that procrastination improves their performance because the pressure that comes with imminent deadline increases their performance: "I do my best work under pressure" (Ferrari et al., 1995; Lay, 1995).

Managing Better

The notion that sociocultural norms may play an important role in procrastination suggests that broader societal changes may be required to affect the prevalence of procrastination. As is the case with other prevalent problematic behaviors, the causal factors that are shared among individuals within a social environment may need to change to create sustainable changes in the behavior of many individuals.

Although procrastination is prevalent in societies with a fast pace of life (van Eerde, 2003), not everyone is a chronic procrastinator. Thus, although collective interventions may be effective for sustainable changes, it may be possible that individual-level approaches can complement broader normative changes. It may be possible to manage procrastination and any resulting negative social emotions in a way to avoid becoming a chronic procrastinator or to alter chronic procrastination habits. Our primary focus in this chapter was to examine emotional experiences related to the motivation to procrastinate. An important question remains: are some emotional experiences helping people out of procrastination?

From a norms perspective, adhering to norms contributes to the experience of being a valued person. At an emotional level, pride and respect are two emotions which signal to individuals that they are valued. Overall, particularly in a North American context, people experience a predominance of positive social emotions (Heine, 2012; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Leary, 2000; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). When people transgress norms, in addition to experiencing negative social emotions, they also experience a decrease in the typical levels of positive social emotions they experience (e.g., Giguère, Sirois & Lalonde, 2013; Giguère et al., 2015; Vaswani et al., 2015). When people experience such a decrease in positive social emotions, they may become motivated to seek out actions to restore that emotional state. For example, Dave might come home after the evening of trick-or-treating and say to his wife "I'm not proud of myself, I should have started to get their costumes organized earlier." This loss of pride may motivate Dave to start to make plans to restore it. For example, he could

plan ahead for the next Halloween, work with his kids to plan creative costumes and even to plan a set of decorations for their house to give it a "scary feeling."

Given our need to belong is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), people actively try to socially advance by making connections with others in order to fulfill that need. When people detect negative social cues indicating they are no longer socially advancing, they begin to make efforts to realize gains in this regard (e.g., Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, & Knowles, 2009). After detecting negative social cues indicating a threat to social advancement, people may think about actions that they did not do, which, had they done, might have resulted in different social responses from others (Molden et al., 2009). Procrastination is precisely about not having done certain actions to achieve an intended valued goal. The negative social cues resulting from transgressing normative expectations tied to goal pursuit (e.g., what the result should look like; how long it normally takes to get something done) may cause people to reflect on those things that they did not do, which resulted in their not completing the intended goal. In situations of procrastination, where people have recently experienced a drop in positive social cues and pride, they may engage in restorative future behavior, seeking out positive social cues and affiliation in an attempt to restore their pride (Giguère et al., 2013). In this state of eagerness to advance social connections, people will likely try to increase future instances of receiving positive social cues by adhering to social norms, such as completing a goal within an acceptable period of time, and be rewarded with positive social cues, affiliation, and feelings of pride. A focus on increasing affiliation and pride through future behavior rather than engaging in self-blame for the poor outcome of procrastinatory behavior (Sirois & Kitner, 2015) would help to stop the cycle of instances of procrastination leading to the experience of shame, and, in turn, motivating procrastination. From this view, pride in getting things done may be an emotional out to counteract the negative effect of procrastination and shame.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary goal of this chapter was to offer a sociocultural perspective on procrastinatory behavior. From this perspective, procrastination constitutes a failure to engage in self-regulation that leads to the transgression of social norms. Since procrastination signals potential problems with the person's ability to engage in self-control and regulate their impulses, it is a type of

transgression likely to lead to the perception that the person is a "bad person"; a person who cannot be trusted to fulfill his or her obligations and commitment to others, such as reciprocating a favor, and thus not ideal to associate with. This type of transgression increases the likelihood the person will experience feelings of shame, as well as its related cognitive and behavioral impact on health and well-being.

This perspective offers a novel understanding of procrastination suggesting that social factors tied to normative influence may play an important role in shaping procrastination and procrastination habits. It also suggests that a possible avenue to break the cycle of procrastination may be to intervene at a societal or group level to change norms about work habits and task completion. At an individual level, possible avenues of intervention may focus on changing how individuals negotiate the dynamic influence processes of the norms they perceive in their social environment, such as by focusing on positive emotions, particularly those linked to perceptions of being a valued person, of self-compassion, and by providing an overall sense of self-efficacy.

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