The Roots of Procrastination:

A Sociological Inquiry into Why I Wait Until Tomorrow

Jennifer M. Kosmas

UMass Boston

_____

Ever since high school, I have struggled with handing in papers late, withdrawing from classes, and failing classes due to incomplete work. I have always wondered why? When my academic work first became negatively affected, I thought it was due to my diagnosed depression. I would take time off to "recover" and then when I felt "ready" for school again I would enroll. And yet my cycle of failure persists to this day. This has brought forth much frustration and aggravation throughout much of the latter part of my life, especially because I particularly enjoy learning and taking classes. I realize this compulsive habit may be due to my lack of self-confidence.

We began this semester by watching the film *The Matrix*, which pertains to **George Herbert Mead's** theory of **symbolic interactionism** and **the self**, as it is only through self-knowledge that one can best determine one's own actions. In **Herbert Blumer's** view, the individual has the capacity to critically reflect on what s/he learned in the past, and through **self-interaction** make his/her own interpretation and decisions regarding what course of action to follow, even if at odds with what broader society prescribes. The notion is especially important to Mead because he believes that the "human act is formed through self-interaction" (Wallace and Wolf, 201). The Matrix is an artificial reality that the individual perceives as being actual reality; therefore, when Neo learns that his mind is actually a part of the Matrix, through training and exercise learns to experience the Matrix as defines it for himself. In this situation, Neo is self-interacting, but his self-interaction can generate the virtual reality of the Matrix. But to arrive at that power, he had to relearn his past. During the movie Neo is shown a sign that reads, "Know Thyself." This is to show that we must try to understand ourselves and acknowledge our own incarcerations in the society we find ourselves so that we may set ourselves free from social prisons that may be partly a result of our own actions and the virtual realities we have create for ourselves through our harmful self-interactions. If we can become aware of our own social constructions, then we can also break out of the self-destructive habits by knowing ourselves. For instance, in knowing that low self-esteem causes my problems with procrastination, I know I can reinterpret my behavior based on my past knowledge and by using and applying this new knowledge obtain a different outcome. If I explore and can understand the reasons for which I procrastinate, then I will be able to change my self-destructive behavior. It is all whether one wants to know the truth or not. Would you take the red pill or the blue pill?

I joke about my procrastination with others, but when I look at the feelings I experience when I try to complete certain tasks, such as when I sit down to write a paper, some of them include: agony, anxiety, depression, mental block, embarrassment, lack of self-esteem, loneliness, and guilt for not having made more of an effort to finish to my full potential. Of course it would be

easier to just do things on time; I create even more stress for myself by not doing so. But I do not procrastinate in all areas of my life, only those with which the feelings described above are associated. That is why I believe that my lack of self-confidence is a viable explanation for my recurring hindrance.

The distinction between my making jokes with others and the emotions I face when I am by myself can be described using Erving Goffman's theory of **dramaturgy** in everyday life, or the ways in which we present ourselves theatrically, as if on a stage. All of us seem to play roles of **actors** on an increasingly global stage. "Goffman looks at the ways individuals in their everyday lives present themselves and their activities to others; in particular, he focuses on **impression management**, the ways in which the individual guides and controls the impressions others form of him or her" (Wallace and Wolf, 230). When I seem calm and collected and joke about my problem with procrastination, I am merely trying to manage the impressions I am giving to others on the **front stage**, so that the audience that is observing me does not really know the feelings I experience in the **back region**, where I experience my anxieties and negative feelings about myself. What I would not want to show in the front region are the feelings of embarrassment I experience for both those that know me well and those that don't—since my procrastination often leads to a lasting reputation that is not indicative of my true capabilities.

When I contemplate as to *why* I may have such negative feelings about myself in the first place, however, I need to examine the interaction that I had with my parents growing up. In her essay, "Honor thy Father and Mother," Nancy Chapin states that "parents are transmitters of attitudes that the child adopts in forming a self image" (Chapin, 47). Undoubtedly with good intentions, (mainly) my father had unreasonable expectations of me throughout my life.

He expressed this disparagingly, which always left me feeling inadequate. I began to see myself as if no matter what I did, nothing would be good enough, and I too, now, have high expectations of myself that I feel I cannot fulfill. While today I know that these feelings are unfounded, his attitude still had detrimental effects on my overall self-esteem. Berger and Luckmann's **phenomenological** view stresses that "**face-to-face** interaction is where the real action is" (Wallace and Wolf, 278). Face-to-face interaction allows me to internalize "knowledge about myself from others … as in a 'mirror response'" (Berger and Luckmann summary, class handout). Seeing the disappointment and disapproving looks on my father's face when I brought home an A- instead of an A, or the distress I received throughout my high school softball career are just a few examples. When I **internalize** what appears to be **objectivated** rules of school evaluation set in the family as **externalized** by my father, I end up with certain perceptions of myself which often turn into **self-fulfilling prophecies**. If I keep telling myself that I will not succeed at certain tasks, then I am setting myself up for my own failure. Berger and Luckmann's "**social construction of reality** theory argues that whenever individuals engage in internalization, they are conforming to the expectations of existing social institutions" (Wallace and Wolf, 282). By internalizing my perceptions of myself through my father's objectivation in what is my **primary group** of **socialization**, I am not only conforming to my father's expectations of me to do well in school and sports, but I am also conforming to **social norms** which have been set in society for individuals' in terms of excelling in school and sports.

The kind of interactions I had with my father growing up also illustrates Charles Horton Cooley's important concept in the symbolic interactionist sociological perspective: **the looking glass self**. Cooley defines this concept as being constituted of

the following three elements: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Wallace and Wolf, 195). These "mirror" imaginations, which were reflected back to me through my perception of my father's reactions, were more often than not negative. As Mead states, "Our behavior is seen as reflexive because we are able to understand and react to what others think and say about our behavior" (Farganis, 159). Mead also goes further to distinguish between two divisions or phases of the self—the "**I**" and the "**me**." The "me" is what you are given by the outside world, or society—it is how others perceive you. The "I" responds to the "me," and is how you interpret and respond to the "me." My "I" responds to my "me"s negatively because I am constantly being given negative messages about myself through how I interpret and internalize my father's reactions towards me. This sets the stage for the self-interactions that I have with myself—"the internal conversations one has with oneself are an essential part of the Meadian perspective because they are the means by which human beings take into account and organize themselves for action" (Wallace and Wolf, 200). Mead's "most significant insight," in fact, "was his view of human behavior as reflexive, by which he meant that you and I think before we act in many of our important activities" (Farganis, 159). When I am preparing to sit down and write a paper, for example, the interaction that I have with myself leads me to imagine the negative reaction I would be receiving from my father, which in turn, through my negative self-interaction, leads to procrastinating tendencies. I then become unmotivated to write my paper in fear that whatever the outcome I will feel as if I did poorly, and as if doing my best would never be good enough anyway. Sometimes I may not be even thinking this out in my head, but pre-vious negative "self-feelings" have left their marks in my mind, influencing my behavior subconsciously.

Mead stresses the importance of **symbolic meaning**, or, how we create and use symbols and attribute subjective meanings to them in our social interactions. As individuals, we communicate to each other through the use of symbols such as **gestures**, which are physical indications of a predictable action and can stimulate a reaction. In a single gesture, we can communicate to another and give meaning to a situation without the use of words. Through the use of symbols we are able to come to our own conclusions, make decisions and act upon them, which give individuals control over their own lives as well as the potential for intervention. The gestures I received from my father included such things as making sure that I saw him shaking his head in disgust and walking away during the middle of a softball game while I may have not been having my best day at pitching. He expressed his ways of discouragement through symbols which I had learned were negative reflections— "gestures thus internalized are significant symbols because they have the same meaning for all individual members of a given society or social group, i.e., they respectively arouse the same attitudes in the individuals making them that they arouse in the individuals responding to them" (Wallace and Wolf, 203). I can only assume that this was my father's way of trying to help me do better, but when I needed positive support the most, he usually did things which always left me feeling badly about myself because I had learned that his gestures were meant to be negative.

Mead's concept of symbolic meaning and gestures go hand-in-hand with Harold Garfinkel's theory of **ethnomethodology**. Gestures are used to portray meaning as a form of communication, assuming that the gestures have the same meaning to all individuals involved. Scholars who use eth-

nomethodology pay particular attention to and study the taken for granted elements of every day life. Some gestures may seem like common sense to certain individuals, but if they do not carry the same meaning for all the individual involved then the symbolic meaning of what is being conveyed—and, more importantly, the communication itself—is lost or misinterpreted. I possibly could have been taking for granted what my father was trying to impress upon me, and that this was his way of showing his love and encouragement to me because he wanted me to be the best at school and softball. Maybe this was the way in which his family brought him up, and he was passing that on to me because those were the ways he learned and knew for raising children.

The film *12 Angry Men* can be useful when we look at Mead and Herbert Blumer's theories. The twelve men in the courtroom have all been exposed to the same situation, and yet each comes to their own conclusions about the case. The information in the courtroom is processed by each individual differently as each of their personal experiences brought along their own biases. These biases, stereotypes, and/or different experiences led to the inability to relate to people, in this case the convict, on a personal level. Henry Fonda's character is different because he has a constant awareness of what is going on around him, and is able to "put himself in the shoes" of another individual. Fonda's ability to resist the group's pressure through his initial vote against the guilty verdict pressured everyone to "take on the role of the other" and come to a rational conclusion about the case.

Up until this point, I have been trying to explain my issues with procrastination through **microsociological** perspectives, or those that are concerned mainly with one-on-one encounters. But there are some **macrosociological** perspectives which can certainly get to the root of my behaviors as well, or those which can be explained through larger-scale interpretations of how society affects us individually. George Homans, a **social exchange** theorist who still focuses on the micro social interactions, explains "social behavior as an exchange of activity … between at least two persons." (Wallace and Wolf, 307). He goes on to set up five propositions, three of which I find particularly helpful in explaining my troubles with procrastination:

> (1) the **success proposition** states that for all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action; (2) the **stimulus proposition** states that a person is more likely to perform an action in which there was the occurrence of stimuli present where a person's action has been rewarded; and (3) the **aggression-approval proposition** states that when a person's action does not receive the reward he expected, or receives punishment he did not expect, he will be angry; he becomes more likely to perform aggressive behavior, and results of such behavior become more valuable to him (the frustration-aggression hypothesis). (Wallace and Wolf, 306-307)

Basically stated, people will repeat rewarding actions and avoid actions for which they are punished. In my case, I was looking more for emotional rewards and positive reinforcement, but repeatedly was not given one. **Randall Collins** has suggested that **rational choice** theory should take the approach of "emotions rather than material rewards as the primary force driving human actions. What he labels 'emotional energy' can be seen as a continuum, from confidence, enthusiasm, and happiness through to depression and gloom"

77

(Wallace and Wolf, 365). If we relate this to the interactions which I had with my father, it can be seen that my father's reactions to my performance in both school and sports always led me to feel as if I were being penalized and reprimanded even when I tried my best. Therefore, it would make sense that one would not want to repeat actions that are punishable. I was not rewarded emotionally for my performance as a student or a pitcher; instead I was repeatedly disciplined, leading to the lowering of my self-esteem.

I can relate a lot to the main character, Billy, in the film *Billy Elliott,* as I am all too familiar with the experience of an authoritarian father. My father became very involved early on and throughout my high school softball passion, and soon enough wanted me to succeed and nothing other than the best was good enough. As a pitcher, I practiced everyday, and I could not get involved in any other activities. I wanted to participate in drama but was not allowed to, since my father did not think this activity would not be as valuable to me as sports. This assigned value was a direct reflection of how society viewed, in this case, playing a sport versus being a drama kid. "Homans uses the assumption that people value approval to explain how conformity is created and maintained in informal groups" (Wallace and Wolf, 315). It became all about competition and making an impression on other people. Peter Blau, a major social exchange theorist, also "emphasizes the importance in social exchange of 'impression management,' or how people present themselves to others. (Wallace and Wolf, 329). When Billy was found to be taking ballet classes instead of going to boxing classes, his father insisted on his going to boxing and never to ballet classes again—even though Billy had a natural talent for ballet. His father reacted as such partly because of the stereotypes associated with boys participating in ballet, and also because of the ways in which others would view him; he was initially embarrassed by his son's dancing. We can see how macrosocial factors such as class and gender stereotypes affected Billy's growing up. When Billy's father intervened, Billy began losing his concentration, and became frustrated and angry—even briefly giving up his dreams of ballet. To this day I have these same feelings. Although I quit softball before I started college, I have struggled with completing schoolwork for years because I fear persistent failure. Unlike Billy's father, my father never realized how his behavior was oppressive, despite his good intentions. Robert Merton's distinction between **manifest and latent functions** may somewhat apply here, as the manifest function of my father's efforts in helping me served the latent function (or, in this case, **dysfunction**) of inhibiting my school work.

I found interesting studies which linked authoritarian parenting to the personality development of daughters in general, and particularly the predisposition to procrastination in female adolescents. The characteristics of the types of parents which lead to low self-esteem, depression, and procrastination in daughters were very similar to those of my own. For example, fathers which tended to be hostile and were judged as authoritarian had daughters who claimed low self-esteem (Ferrari & Olivette, 963). The research indicates that parental authority has an impact on their child's academic performance. "A growing body of literature suggests that chronic decisional procrastination may be a maladaptive personality tendency … A cognitive antecedent of performance delay, decisional procrastination, or indecision, is said to be a coping pattern used to deal with decision-making situations perceived as stressful" (Ferrari & Olivette, 963). It is also noted that while procrastination can be related to low self-esteem, it is not associated with lack of intelligence. In a study, "46 procrastinators compared with 52 nonprocrastinators claimed lower self-esteem, greater public

self-consciousness and social anxiety, and a stronger tendency toward self-handicapping" (Ferrari, 455). I was similarly not invited to be part of decision-making; to this day I have difficulties with effective decision-making.

I have been realizing recently that over time I have learned to use avoidance as almost a coping mechanism. As with procrastination, which is really just a way of avoiding the present, I avoid confrontation of any kind because I no longer want to experience negative self-feelings that I associate with the interaction that I had with my father. It is expected that "further research will provide evidence for persistent procrastination as a personality disorder that includes anxiety, avoidance, and a fear of evaluation of ability." (Ferrari, 455)

I see my family's behavior and attitudes as a direct result of society's views and values. I would consider my family to be fairly well off and very much involved in our capitalist economy. I, on the other hand, have found useful Marx's ideas and critique of capitalism. Marx believed that "individuals cannot reach their full potential as human beings because they are restricted by the relationships in which they are enmeshed" (Hurst, 12). This then leads to *alienation* from others and one's own potentials. This is very much a result of dominant *ideologies*, or beliefs which reflect the interests of dominant classes and groups in society. Marx also believed that "people behave the way they do because of the nature of their involvement in economic relationships" (Hurst, 12). Capitalism is the driving force of our everyday lives, as the obsessive search for the "American Dream," defined in terms of materialistic goals and values, has become more and more a goal for individuals and society as a whole. In each of the other films viewed in class—*Affluenza* and *The Big One*—we are able to see numerous examples of just how the materialistic culture affects us as a whole and as individuals. People now are

spending beyond their means so that they are perceived as middle-class, or better off than they really are. I am very much against consumerism, whereas I have noticed my own family to be very much involved in impressing others with the wealth that they accumulate. I believe that this drives people further and further apart, and will be devastating for individuals and society in the end. I do not have the same ideals as my family in this regard—and am therefore viewed as "**deviant**" in a way—because I do not strive to consume and therefore project the idea that I am or seek to be wealthy. They probably worry that I will be viewed negatively by society—or perhaps they do not want to be viewed negatively themselves.

Talcott Parsons's **functionalist theory** emphasizes the process of socialization, "where societal values are internalized by a society's members" (Wallace and Wolf, 27). Parsons's views on *pattern variables*, or "variables which represent a problem or dilemma that must be solved by the actor before the action can take place" (Wallace and Wolf, 32), can also be applied to my own issues. The first pattern variable is between *ascription* and *achievement*, or quality versus performance. Modern society is supposed to help people base their actions on achievement rather than ascribed qualities they are born with. This means that I am supposed to be judged by others (such as my family) more by what I am supposed to "achieve" in life, than who I am. Another pattern variable that applies here is *affectivity* versus *affective neutrality*, which requires from individuals in modern life to maintain emotional detachment and neutrality in the conduct of their social tasks. basically on whether or not an individual will expect emotional gratification in the relationship. Lastly, the *collectivity-self* pattern variable directs us in modern life to seek self-interests in contrast to collective and communal bond characterizing traditional social life. A "functioning" capital-

ism then tends to favor self-interested, over-rationalizing, over-achievers in modern life, disregarding who they are, what they feel, and their social bonds. These all are macrosocial factors that can influence individuals' actions, such as those of my father or myself, depending on whether and how we internalize and accept them through the process of our socializations.

We do not have to accept such social influences, however, even if we are labeled as deviant as a result. Robert Merton's theory of deviance treats anomie as "a discontinuity between cultural goals and the legitimate means available for reaching them" (Wallace and Wolf, 56). He arrives at five approaches to goals, means and adaptations which help to explain the different types of *deviance*. "Merton chose to use a plus sign (+) to indicate acceptance of the goal of monetary success or the means to the goal, and he used a minus sign (-) to indicate the rejection (or unavailability) of the goal or means to it" (Wallace and Wolf, 56). The results of each of the available options leads to five *modes of adaptation*: (1*) conformity*; (2) *innovation*; (3) *ritualism*; (4) *retreatism*; and (5) *rebellion*, all of which are actually treated as forms of deviance by Merton. This can be applied to Erin in the film *Erin Brockovich*, because she was viewed as a "deviant" by those with whom she worked because of the clothes she chose to wear; yet, she resisted the social pressures to change and went on to be successful in her endeavors.

Although it was never the case, I was and still am seen as "rebellious," "deviant," or as someone who does things just to hurt my family. This is because I, as an individual, do not necessarily accept the things that I was taught and brought up with. I come from a conservative family, which is not open and accepting to new ideas, whereas I am very liberal, and an activist for causes that I feel passionately about. It was around the time when I was getting old enough to have my own ideas, opinions,

and developing my own individuality that my father really began cracking down on me and we grew more and more distant. I have always felt as if my voice was never heard or, if heard, was rejected. I quickly became afraid to share my values and opinions with others because of the fear of being judged and not taken seriously. This is because my morals and beliefs were different than those of my family. I felt as if my opinions were never validated and that my individuality and independence was discouraged. I developed ideas of my own and acted not in accordance with the societal norms that my father tried to pass on to his children. As Kristy Canfield states in her essay, "Repairing the Soul: Matching Inner with Outer Beauty" (2002), "'The grass is greener on the other side' until one takes the initiative to search within one's self for improvement. Oppression is a social construct of this society but ultimately our social standing depends on our will to rise above others' actions and words" (20). As a result of feeling "oppressed" by my family, I may have turned to procrastination as a way of controlling something in my own life—I can choose to fail instead of being assigned failure.

But the right answer to my dilemma should be to resist and set myself free from the social pressures exerted by my family, and thus act according to my own conscience. "Liberation is not simply a possibility, but a necessity for humanity. It is the unity of these capacities of critical reflection and practical action in the organism … that actualizes a fully human potential; any one-sidedness either way would bring about only 'verbalism' on one hand, or 'activism' on the other—both equally regarded by Freire as being deviations from the path of humanization" (Tamdgidi, 4). Looking at my behavior of procrastination in this new way has shown me a solution. I am now beginning to understand the reason why I feel so negatively about myself. I need to look in a new way at myself in the context of my

family and society, and thereby change the course of my previous actions. This paper has already been a new journey of understanding myself. I never conceived of the reasons why I procrastinated. Knowing this, I am able to see a solution in the end, where I am able to change my own behavior to meet my own needs.

REFERENCES

Farganis, James. (2004). *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism.* Fourth Edition. Boston: McGraw Hill Inc.

Ferrari, Joseph, R. *Compulsive procrastination: some self-reported characteristics. Psychological Reports*, April 1991 v 68 n2 p455(4).

Ferrari, Joseph, R.; Olivette, Michael, J. *Perceptions of parental control and the development of indecision among late adolescent females. Adolescence*, Winter 1993, v28, n112 p963(8).

Farganis, J. (2000). *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism.* Third edition. McGraw Hill College Divison.

Tamdgidi, H. Mohammad. (2004). *Freire Meets Gurdjieff and Rumi: Towards the Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Oppressing Selves.* Department of Sociology: Umass Boston.

Wallace, R and Wolf, A. (1999). *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Expanding the Classical Tradition.* Fifth Edition. New Jersey: Prentice hall.

Films:

"Affluenza". (1997). Bullfrog Films

"Billy Elliot". (2000). Universal Pictures.

"The Big One". (1999). Miramax Home Entertainment.

"The Matrix". (1999). Warner Brothers.

"Twelve Angry Men". (1957). MGM.