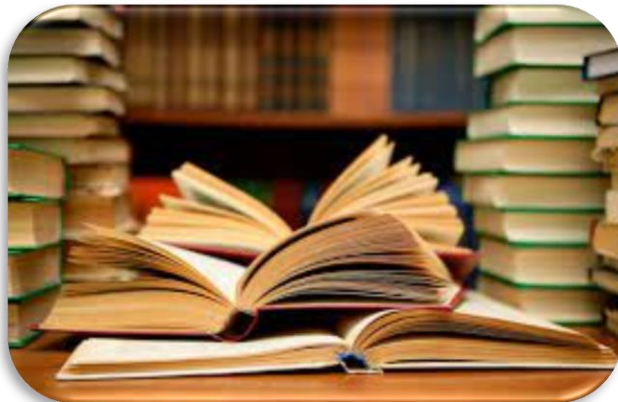


## Review Paper



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## Academic Procrastination from Attribution Theory Perspective: An Overview

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### ABSTRACT

Academic procrastination is a common problem among students that is linked to negative outcomes. Its history dates back to ancient times, but it has become more prevalent in modern times due to the emphasis on time and efficiency. Academic procrastination is a specific type of procrastination that is common among students due to the large amount of assignments and deadlines in academic contexts. Attribution theory is a psychological framework that can help us understand how students explain their own procrastination behavior and the factors that contribute to it. Attribution theory encompasses three dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability. Each dimension has an impact on an individual's future behavior, including whether they procrastinate on or complete a task. It is possible to predict that individuals who tend to procrastinate academically may attribute their academic tasks to external locus of control, stable causes, and factors that are outside their control. In contrast, individuals who do not procrastinate are likely to attribute their academic tasks to internal locus of control, unstable causes, and factors that are within their control. Understanding these theories can help educators and students develop strategies to overcome procrastination and improve academic performance.

**Key words:** Academic Procrastination, Attribution Theory, Locus of Control, Stability, Controllability

### اهمال کاری تحصیلی از دیدگاه تئوری انتساب: یک مرور کلی

اهمال کاری تحصیلی یک مشکل رایج در بین دانشجویان است که با پیامدهای منفی مرتبط است. تاریخچه آن به دوران باستان باز می‌گردد، اما در دوران معاصر به دلیل تاکید بر زمان و کارایی بیشتر رواج یافته است. اهمال کاری تحصیلی نوع خاصی از اهمال کاری است که به دلیل حجم زیاد تکالیف و ضرب الاجل در زمینه های تحصیلی در بین دانشجویان رایج است. نظریه انتساب یک چارچوب روان‌شناختی است که می‌تواند به ما کمک کند تا بفهمیم دانشجویان چگونه رفتار اهمال‌کاری خود و عواملی که به آن کمک می‌کنند را توضیح می‌دهند. اهمال کاری تحصیلی این سه بعد را شامل می‌شود: منبع کنترل، ثبات و کنترل پذیری. هر یک از ابعاد بر رفتار آینده افراد تأثیر می‌گذارد، از جمله اینکه آیا آنها یک کار را به تعویق می‌اندازند یا کامل می‌کنند. می‌توان پیش بینی کرد که افرادی که تمایل به اهمال کاری تحصیلی دارند ممکن است وظایف تحصیلی خود را به منبع کنترل بیرونی، علل پایدار و عواملی که خارج از کنترل آنها است نسبت دهند. در مقابل، افرادی که اهمال کاری نمی‌کنند احتمالاً وظایف تحصیلی خود را به منبع کنترل درونی، علل ناپایدار و عواملی که در کنترل آنها است نسبت می‌دهند. درک این نظریه ها می‌تواند به اساتید و دانشجویان کمک کند تا راهبردهایی برای غلبه بر اهمال کاری و بهبود عملکرد تحصیلی ایجاد کنند.

**واژگان کلیدی:** اهمال کاری تحصیلی، تئوری انتساب، منبع کنترل، ثبات، کنترل پذیری

## OVERVIEW

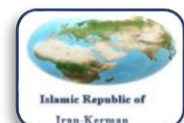
Procrastination is described as the very essence of self-regulatory failure (Zarzycka, Liszewski, & Marzel, 2021) that is linked to negative outcomes (Sirois, 2023). Procrastination has been defined by Sirois (2022) as an all-too-common self-regulation problem that involves the unnecessary and voluntary delay in the start or completion of important intended tasks despite the recognition that this delay may have harmful consequences.

Procrastination is not a modern phenomenon afflicting us today. Its history dates back to as early as 1400 B.C. because people living then had problems with time management (Ocak & Boyraz, 2016). As Steel (2007) stated, although procrastination had a harmful impact on people living in ancient times, its deleterious effect on the daily lives of people living in industrial era was even worse because time and efficiency were considered as key concepts that prevailed in their everyday responsibilities. The history of procrastination has also vividly delineated that it not only affects individuals, it also has negative impacts on societies.

Procrastination is a prevalent, unavoidable behavior since individuals may have a myriad of potential responsibilities and tasks that they could be doing at any time (Huang, Zhang, Bodla, & Wang, 2022). Nevertheless, procrastination has been shown to be domain specific. The results of the study by Klingsieck (2013) identified six domains in which individuals procrastinate. These domains are: academic and work, everyday routines and obligations, health, leisure, family and partnership, social contacts. Since each of these domains has its own specific prevalence rate, each one needs to be investigated and scrutinized per se to realize and understand its features, impacts, and theoretical approaches. One of the notorious domains whose prevalence rate is escalating is academic procrastination (Abramowski, 2018). As academic contexts are characterized by large amounts of assignments and deadlines, students are prone to engage in procrastination, and up to 95% of the students have been reported to procrastinate (Steel, 2007). Academic procrastination is restricted to the tasks and activities pertaining to and/or relevant for learning and studying and has been defined as voluntarily putting off an intended course of study-related action in spite of expecting to be worse off for the delay (Steel & Klingsieck, 2016).

The challenge in the area of procrastination research is that it often lacks a coherent, theoretical explanation of the behavior (Hailikari, Katajavuori, & Asikainen, 2021). Even though a comprehensive theory for academic procrastination has not been established, its theoretical roots are found in social cognitive theory, attribution theory, and motivation theories. Each theory incorporates the key principles of self-efficacy, self-regulation, and motivation, but each approaches academic procrastination from a unique angle (Janssen, 2015).

As mentioned above, there are several theoretical perspectives that explain academic procrastination and its causes. One theory is Temporal Motivation Theory (TMT). TMT plains the reasons why people's motivation to act increases as time approaches a deadline with time discounting effect (Zhang, Liu, & Feng, 2019). According to TMT, motivation increases when people have confidence in acquiring a desired reward or outcome. However, motivation declines when there is a large amount of time before the reward is realized and when people are sensitive to delays (Zhang et al., 2019).



TMT proposes that people consider three factors when making decisions about when to act: the value of the task, the person's expectancy of success, and the person's sensitivity to delay or procrastination (Zhang & Feng, 2020). The theory suggests that these factors interact to determine the level of motivation to act at any given time.

Another theory explaining academic procrastination is Cognitive-Behavioral Theory (CBT). CBT suggests that people procrastinate due to established ways of thinking, and within this framework, CBT highlights the importance of replacing irrational beliefs with rational ones (Toker & Avcı, 2015). CBT suggests that by identifying and changing negative thought patterns, individuals can overcome procrastination and improve their academic performance (van Eerde & Klingsieck, 2018). This can be achieved through various techniques such as cognitive restructuring, which involves identifying and challenging negative thoughts and replacing them with more positive, realistic ones.

Attribution Theory (AT) is another important theory involved in the study of academic procrastination because it considers people's motivation by analyzing their reasons for success and failures (Graham, 1991). Attribution theory is concerned with the perceived causes of success and failure. It is one of the most prominent theories of motivation in the field of education research (Graham, 2020). The starting point for the theory is an outcome perceived as a success or failure and the search to determine why that outcome occurred. Attribution theory typically emphasizes the process of determining whether a behavior is situationally-caused (i.e., precipitated by external factors) or dispositionally-caused (caused by internal characteristics) (Ybarra & Stephan, 1999). According to Weiner (2012), the attributions people make affect their emotions. For instance, people are more likely to feel pride if they believe that they succeeded due to internal characteristics, such as innate talent, rather than external factors, such as luck. Therefore, people tend to attribute their successes or failures to factors allowing them to feel as good as possible about themselves (Janssen, 2015).

In attribution theory there are three underlying dimensions on which outcomes for an academically related task hinge: locus of control, stability, and controllability. Each of these elements has a profound effect on an individual's future behavior, such as procrastinating on a task or completing it. Out of the three above-mentioned dimensions, locus of control has been shown to be the most important dimension since it has a significant impact on individuals' beliefs regarding their ability to control certain events (Marks, 1998). Locus of control refers to whether a person attributes their performance to an internal or external cause (Zuidema, Hornstra, Schuitema, & Poorthuis, 2023). As a result, locus of control can have an internal or external nature. When a student in an academic setting succeeds in completing a given task, that success will result in increased self-efficacy and pride. Conversely, when that person fails to complete a task and attributes their failure to internal causes, this failure will lead to diminished self-efficacy and self-esteem (Janssen, 2015). Conversely, an explanation that attributes causation to external factors, such as coincidence or luck, is known as an external causal explanation.

Just like locus of control, stability is another factor that affects how people behave. Stability refers to the likelihood that people will continue to engage in certain behaviors and their belief about whether these behaviors can be changed over time (Weiner, 2000). According to Weiner (1980), causes that are considered stable, such as intelligence, are difficult or impossible to change, while unstable causes, such



as the amount of effort put into a task, can be changed easily. In other words, stable factors are those that are unlikely to change, while unstable factors are those that can be changed relatively easily.

Controllability, like stability, also affects a student's behavior. Within attribution theory, controllability is one of the elements that people attribute to their success or failure (Malle, 2011). A factor that is considered controllable is one that people believe they can change if they want to. For instance, reading aptitude is a controllable factor. When students believe they have control over their academic abilities, they are more likely to be motivated to put in effort towards academic tasks, such as studying or completing assignments. On the other hand, an uncontrollable factor is one that people perceive they cannot change. Aptitude is an example of an uncontrollable factor (Janssen, 2015). Therefore, when struggling students attribute their academic success or failure to aptitude, they are less motivated to put in effort towards academic tasks because they believe failure is inevitable.

Attribution theory plays an important role in studying academic procrastination as each component of the theory has a significant impact on a person's future behavior, including whether they will complete a task or procrastinate. It is possible to predict that individuals who tend to procrastinate academically may attribute their academic tasks to external locus of control, stable causes, and factors that are outside their control. In contrast, individuals who do not procrastinate are likely to attribute their academic tasks to internal locus of control, unstable causes, and factors that are within their control. Attribution theory is a psychological framework that examines how people explain the causes of events and behaviors. In the context of academic procrastination, attribution theory can help us understand how students explain their own procrastination behavior and the factors that contribute to it. Overall, attribution theory can provide insights into how students perceive and explain their own academic procrastination behavior, and how those perceptions may impact their motivation and willingness to take action to improve their academic performance.

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