

PRODUCING PROCRASTINATION: NEGOTIATING AFFECT AND  
TEMPORALITY IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

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## **ABSTRACT**

**ALLYSON SHAFFER: Producing Procrastination: Negotiating Affect and Temporality  
in Contemporary Capitalism  
(Under the direction of Lawrence Grossberg)**

This thesis explores power, subjectivity, affect and temporality in contemporary capitalism in three parts. First, it uses a Foucauldian understanding of power to examine the subjectifying effects of the therapeutic discourse around procrastination as found in online-self-help articles. The second section reports on a focus group study in which clerical and administrative employees discussed procrastination, emotions and the use of alternate time management techniques in negotiating power relations in the immaterial workplace. The third section interprets the emotional politics engaged in each site: the emotions deployed by the disciplining therapeutic discourse, and the emotions negotiated and experienced by the focus group participants. Analyzing the ‘problem’ of procrastination can help provide a platform for better understanding affective, temporal subjectivity and the ways in which power is deployed, negotiated with and struggled over in the contemporary immaterial workplace .

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## INTRODUCTION

A popular idea seems to exist that there is a “we” of American society – primarily (white) middle class upwardly mobile professional individuals – whose day to day lives are crowded with appointments, activities and obligations. “We” understand time as a scarce and individual resource, as Palm Pilots, Blackberrys, iPhones and even old-fashioned day-planners brim over with meetings, events, tasks, and deadlines.

Advertisements offer products that will help “us” complete everyday tasks faster and easier; casual conversations often begin with an account of how busy “we” are; magazine articles suggest tips and expert advice on how to best manage “our” time. “We” may feel anxious about whether “we’re” making the most of “our” time, guilty when “we” feel “we’ve” wasted it, annoyed at those who take “our” time, or happy when “we” find new ways of using or saving time. Stress sprouts up as a ‘natural’ byproduct of hectic lives, threatening, it seems, to take “us” away from who “we “‘really’ are: successful, responsible, productive professionals who know how to multi-task, delegate and otherwise get the job done. Minor pleasures such as watching television, checking email and taking naps tempt “us” into distraction from dealing with stress and anxiety ‘appropriately.’ Thus, stress, and a corresponding cluster of emotions like pleasure and anxiety, seem to constitute an individual problem and roadblock to using “our” temporal resources to the utmost, and like time, must be managed carefully.

This paper will interrogate this story of time and stress in contemporary capitalist, American society in three parts. First, I will situate and describe the therapeutic

discourse around procrastination, using as material and grounding points a variety of online self-help articles about procrastination. Next, I will explore an alternative site of time management by reporting on a focus group study I lead in October and November of 2007, in which I talked to a group of six administrative/clerical workers holding entry- or near entry-level positions about the ways they negotiate time, emotion and selfhood throughout the workday. Finally, I will attempt to interpret the emotional politics engaged in each site: the emotions deployed by the disciplining therapeutic discourse, and the emotions negotiated and experienced by the focus group participants. Thus, my project will begin to address not only questions of affect and time but also of power and selfhood, with a focus on how they intersect and co-produce each other in this particular workplace landscape.

The theoretical framework for my project is grounded in a Foucauldian understanding of power – one that sees power as immanent and everywhere, mobile and changing, arising from “innumerable local points” and producing immediate effects (Foucault, “History,” 98-101). Thus, power thoroughly permeates behavior, including all matters mundane, and – rather than solely operating through refusals and negations – *produces*: behaviors (for example, time-management), attitudes (self-motivation, determination) and even our own identities (the entrepreneur, the self-actualized individual, the efficient and successful employee/citizen) (11).

Power in our society is also normative and disciplinary: it deploys “infinitesimal surveillances” and “meticulous orderings” in order to categorize, hierarchize, and detail life in its attempt to control it (144-5). This normalizing power operates “by establishing a common definition of goals and procedures,” that delineate “what counts as a problem

to be solved and what counts as a solution,” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 198). Behaviors that count as problems are pathologized and catalogued in a disciplinary system that continuously marks differentiations between and among them in order administer life, produce docile bodies, and extend the reach of knowledge and power (Dreyfus and Rabinow 198; Foucault, “Discipline,” 18, 138) . Foucault describes how knowledge and power are inextricably implicated with and co-constitutive of one another: power builds specific ‘regimes’ of knowledge that in turn authorize and constitute power – in fact, the very act of saying what is true is a deployment of power (Foucault, “History” 27). Building on this Foucauldian framework, I later turn to cultural studies scholar Sarah Ahmed’s analysis of the politics of emotions such as guilt, shame and anxiety, in order to craft an interpretation of power, emotions and temporality.

Through my work, then, I hope to offer a small but specific description of how power operates on a micro-political level, including how we can craft spaces and tactics for alternative, if not resistant, modes of being. As Foucault tells us, resistance can be found anywhere and everywhere power is; and it is just as immanent and mobile and productive as power (Foucault, “History” 95-96). I believe the question of procrastination in the workplace to be important because procrastination, as an object of study and expert intervention, shows how knowledge-power systems are deployed in all aspects and dimensions of our lives as citizens/employees/consumers. Through understanding how important power struggles are enacted in the workplace and contemporary society in general, where we can create space for alternate modes of time management and practices of resistance, and our very experience of time and our ability to negotiate the world affectively.

## **SELF-REGULATORY FAILURE: THE DISCOURSE OF PROCRASTINATION**

The story goes like this: individuals are ‘naturally’ stressed; all this stress is very understandable (after all, you have a busy life!); and in consideration of this, in order to be the self-actualized, successful person you know yourself to be, in order to maintain your carefully arranged schedule and avoid faltering on your obligations and suffering a variety of psychosomatic symptoms, you must manage this stress, you must manage your emotions, you must manage your time, you must manage yourself. Luckily, “experts” from a range of professions – business experts, life coaches, researchers in psychology – have provided a number of online articles on why you need to and how you can renounce those burst of non-productivity.

This section will look at this discourse of procrastination in order to investigate how it works to produce self-managing individuals who privilege organizational demands and prescribed time management techniques above more autonomous modes of prioritizing tasks and activities;<sup>1</sup> and, in doing so, I will offer a description of how power, knowledge and discourse intersect in everyday life. It is my argument that this discourse of procrastination 1) is based on the assertion that we (the ‘any-citizens’ of

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<sup>1</sup> By ‘more autonomous’ I do not mean to refer to an understanding of the subject as a freely and independently choosing entity, especially as the therapeutic discourse around procrastination relies on this very notion. Rather, I want to refer to building a wider range of viable options and tactics/strategies out of the materials at hand – so, if the workplace is currently exerting a strong ‘gravitation pull’ on subjects (see p. 34), then, in arguing for ‘more autonomy,’ I mean to argue for the space to enable selves to be pulled by a greater multitude of gravity-exerting forces, so that it is not one particular force that dominates to the exclusion of others.

Western Society<sup>2</sup>) are busy and under a constant amount of stress, and 2) uses the ideal of professionalism to mobilize us, as individuals, to internalize the idea that in order to be ‘successful’ we should effectively and efficiently manage our stress, while also 3) pathologizing emotions as a determining factor in time-management decisions and procrastination itself, and 4) thereby inciting us to manage our time to the most productive ends. This normalizing power attempts to create productive, efficient, docile citizens who rarely, if ever, procrastinate.

To analyze the therapeutic discourse around procrastination, I will use a variety of online articles that expose the reading public to a mediated version of the work of procrastination ‘experts’ – people authorized as legitimate ‘knowers’ on the subject, such as professors, researchers, and psychologists. Thus I am looking at expert knowledge as it is articulated within and by popular media.<sup>3</sup> This is because I am more interested in

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Any-citizens,’ that is, that are middle class citizens: procrastination is a particularly middle class problem, a problem only for those who have time in the first place, a privileged sort of problem targeted at relatively privileged people. This is apparent, for example, in how procrastination is a problem for the ‘professional’ to manage (not, say, the factory worker).

<sup>3</sup> While procrastination ‘experts’ are at times quoted in the articles and often summarized and referred to in order to grant these statements with authority, the expert voice deployed through these articles is not identical with the statements authored by the experts themselves. In order to situate the popular discourse with the work of the experts themselves, I read several scholarly articles by psychologist Joseph Ferrari, as well as one of Piers Steel’s articles and his website on procrastination (much of the online articles referred to, summarized and/or quoted Ferrari and/or Steel). Although more research would be needed to analyze the expert discourses themselves, Ferrari’s work seems to largely correspond to the popular discourse. The primary departure is that whereas the popular therapeutic discourse focuses on the time management aspect of procrastination, Ferrari believes procrastination is “a complex phenomenon involving more than time management difficulty” as it is connected to such things as “public self-consciousness, social anxiety, forgetfulness, disorganization, non-competitiveness,” and so on (Ferrari 140-141). Steel’s work also seems to largely correspond to the popular therapeutic discourse, and much of his website seems to echo the articles that refer to him (Steel [www.procrastinus.com](http://www.procrastinus.com)). The primary departure here is that Steel defines procrastination in his own work much more narrowly than it is treated in the popular discourse. For him, “procrastination is to voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay,” (Steel “The Nature of Procrastination” 66). In contrast, the popular discourse seems to posit procrastination more generally as delaying tasks one ‘should’ do. Thus, according to Steel’s work, the time management tactics described by my focus group participants in the second section would be forms of autonomous task aversion/delay, not procrastination per se. It is also important to note that Ferrari and Steel seem to exhibit some disagreement about procrastination, and these differences tend to become obscured or neglected in the popular discourse (for example, at least in the work I have examined, Ferrari



what is being produced and disseminated as ‘official’ or ‘expert’ knowledge specifically *for* popular consumption (rather than, for example, knowledge produced for other ‘experts,’). I believe it is here, between the knowledge positioned as ‘expert’ and the individuals meant to consume it (in all senses of the word) that one can most directly see the work of subjectification in operation. Correspondingly, these online articles are the sort that an individual might be likely to ‘bump into’ – articles they may come across if they google (under “google news”) the word “procrastination” – articles the proclaimed busy (if procrastinating!) person might be the most likely to come into contact with. To this end, then, the articles I use are also ‘popular’ in the sense of being accessed and accessible: in fact, they were all on the first several pages of results a search through news.google.com turned up in late March, 2007.

### **Situating Procrastination: The discourse of professionalization.**

This therapeutic discourse of procrastination, part of a wider discursive context of professionalization, describes/prescribes individuals as ‘naturally’ under a lot of stress that they must necessarily manage ‘effectively’ in order to be productive citizen-employees.

According to British sociologist Nikolas Rose in *Governing the Soul*, the discourse of professionalism or ‘management of excellence’ takes workers’ subjectivity as a target of knowledge/power. In order to ensure that workers maintain the proper motivation to strive for norms of productivity, organizations promote the ideal of the self-actualized, successful “productive subject” or professional who takes his/her fulfillment

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does not seem to necessarily reject anxiety as a cause of procrastination; Steels does, and in fact locates the idea that anxiety causes procrastination primarily within the popular therapeutic discourse – in articles such as I am looking at, and in self-help books).

in work, thus aligning the individual's interests with those of the organization. This discourse also 'responsibilizes' the individual to manage her stress as a condition of her success: while it is 'natural' for one to be stressed, each person must carefully manage her own stress, lest she suffer psychosomatic symptoms and falter on her obligations. According to organizational scholars Kelley and Colquhoun, "To be (a) professional means to be a person capable of making choices and accepting responsibilities that are framed by a duty of care to manage one's health and well-being to maximize organization performance and effectiveness" (Kelley and Colquhoun 136).

### **Seeking the advice of experts: the implicit confession, the internalized examination**

Procrastination is one way in which we may 'fail' to 'care' for ourselves and our organizations properly. Foucault has described two techniques of power present in the intervention of the expert: the confession and the examination.

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* Foucault identifies the confession as one of the "most highly valued techniques" of producing truth (Foucault, "History" 58-59). Confessing the truth supposedly heals the hurt that power-discourse insists is there, but only through recourse to experts, thereby forming "a knowledge of the subject; a knowledge not so much of his form, but of that which divides him, determines him perhaps, but above all causes him to be ignorant of himself," (67, 70). By gathering this information, new spaces are opened up for power to create and fill, to gather data on, to differentiate among more finely, to control (63).

Confession seems implicit in the turn to 'self'-help: the act of seeking out the advice of experts to manage one's own life is, in a sense, a micro-confession ("I confess

that I have been wasting time, and need help managing it more productively”).

Furthermore, as we will see, procrastination management relies on techniques of self-awareness, self-description and self-mastery. In the turn to self-help, the expert becomes internalized rather than directly present. It is the subject who takes himself as his own object of knowledge and power – a docile body who has become so thoroughly trained at the confession he now regulates and governs himself.

The examination is a technique of disciplinary power for the construction of efficient and productive docile bodies (Foucault, “Discipline” 139, 141 – 166). It combines the “techniques of an observing hierarchy” (ordered observation) with “those of a normalizing judgment” to “establish over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them,” (184). Those that ‘pass’ the examination are rewarded by a rise in the ranks (in a sense, the attainment, however contingent and temporary, of their idealized self-image), and those that fail are punished with a more intense, more repetitive form of training (so as to serve as a correctional device) (179-183).

Among the mundane, self-practiced instances of confession are also self-imposed examinations, where one turns the observing eye on oneself, and either rewards oneself with the sought after self-image or punishes oneself with re-training.<sup>4</sup> If it is the latter

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<sup>4</sup> This is another point in which an activity generally involving the expert is internalized and performed on oneself, the individual thus playing both object and intervening expert. The internalization process can be connected to Foucault’s conception of the Panopticon, wherein “visible but unverifiable power” penetrates individuals to the extent that they begin to discipline themselves, showing how “the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary,” (Foucault “Discipline,” 201).

one needs to do, then he can simply attempt to follow the tips and guidelines in the procrastination management article.<sup>5</sup>

### **Disciplining individuals, managing time.**

The majority of the articles on procrastination that I examined addressed either the causes or the effects of procrastination, offered tips to solve the ‘problem’ of procrastination, or some combination. Understanding the causes of procrastination is seen to be necessary for preventing this ‘irrational’ behavior, and listing the effects of procrastination may mobilize the reader into action. Since the effects are operationalized to motivate us to want to understand the causes in order to combat them, with the overarching goal of attaining a norm of productivity, I will start the analysis there.

First, procrastination is defined as an individual problem that has to be solved on an individual basis. It is overwhelmingly spoken about through pathologizing language. One article on *PRweb.com* asserts that “it’s a fact that procrastination is the new national epidemic,” (“It’s National Procrastination Week”). An article published by *Gannet News Service*, tackles the psychosomatic effects of procrastination: “chronic procrastinators suffer more headaches, gastric problems, cold and flu viruses, insomnia, muscle strains, infections and reproductive and menstrual problems than those who handle tasks promptly” (“How to stop”). Procrastination also spawns interpersonal and professional problems, such as “blowing deadlines,” “causing tension with bosses and co-

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, the mere act of seeking out this information and taking the time to read it does not ensure that he will actually successfully pursue or even attempt to pursue the prescribed hints and goals. He may decide to resist, or perhaps fail, in which case he does *not* become somehow outside the power-knowledge regime, but instead risks sinking to a lower rank in the hierarchy (i.e., a ‘less successful’ person) - thus becoming another point of entry for the continued differentiation and description of any/all the pathologies aside the preferred norm.

workers or friction in relationships,” or even the “frittering away” of up to three hours a week at work when you could be doing something more productive for your company” (“How to stop procrastinating – now;” Mathieu).

Furthermore, it is not just the behavior of procrastinators that is pathologized, but also the procrastinators themselves *through* their behavior. An online *Detroit Free Press* article quotes researcher Fuschia Sirois saying she “found people who procrastinate regularly are less likely than non-procrastinators to take part in healthy behaviors like getting enough sleep, exercising moderately and eating well” (Oleck). Joseph Ferrari, in an article in the online *SUNY Cortland News*, likens procrastination to an affective disorder: “To say, ‘just do it’ to a procrastinator is like saying ‘just cheer up’ to a clinically depressed person” (“Procrastination’ to be discussed”). Piers Steel does allow that procrastination is “natural,” but this does not signal resistance to the pathologizing discourse. Instead, he says that “to actually not procrastinate takes planning, effort, and will,” which, when taken along with his other statement that procrastination is “a prevalent and pernicious form of self-regulatory failure,” pathologizes the non-self-actualizing, non-willful individual for not properly mastering herself: procrastination itself might be ‘natural,’ but failing to manage it is most certainly not (Walton).

If procrastinating individuals aren’t meeting the norm of productivity and efficiency, what causes this failure? In keeping with the pathologization of procrastination and procrastinators, the answer is found in individual faults, especially those that pertain to the management of moods, attitudes and emotions. These are the very ‘subjective’ variables to which management has turned its attention in recent decades, in order to reduce organizational risk, and to add value to labor through

maximizing human capital (N. Rose 56, Kelly and Colquhoun 136, Landen 508).

According to the online popular therapeutic discourse on procrastination, procrastinators are not efficient because they cannot manage emotions like fear and pleasure. Some procrastinate because they fear failure or success, while others fall to the temptation of more enjoyable pursuits such as checking email, watching television or sleeping (Basu; Olsen; White). Several articles even accuse procrastinators of indulging in the “pleasure that accompanies jittery nerves before a deadline” – the pleasure of procrastinating itself (Basu; B. Rose; White).

In seeking out specific affective causes of procrastination, experts often break individuals down into separate categories – neatly corresponding to Foucault’s claim that disciplinary power differentiates and organizes – and even ‘makes’ - individuals (Foucault, “Discipline” 170, 181-184). For example, articles in *The Detroit Free Press* and the *Chicago Tribune* quote experts such as Joseph Ferrari as having identified three categories of procrastinators: the arousal type, who is motivated by the rush of waiting until the last minute; the avoider type, who is insecure and fears failure; and the decisional type, who wishes to shirk responsibility (Oleck, B. Rose).

And you should know your type because it is only through knowing why you procrastinate that you can know how to prevent it. In an article from *Gannet News Service*, Marianna Swallow, a Chicago business trainer and consultant, recommends looking at “why you’re procrastinating” in order to attack the problem at its roots (“How to stop”). Piers Steel also stresses the importance of “self-knowledge” in an article from *CNET News.com*, but warns that “most people don’t have that much self-knowledge,” (Olsen) – at least not until they read such an article or purchase a self-help book,

presumably. Thus, we see how the therapeutic discourse on procrastination assumes the subject's initial lack of adequate self-awareness, necessitating the initial expert intervention that then lays the groundwork for the subject to internalize this role. Once internalized, one can (and must) practice the confession implicitly to oneself in one's day to day time- and self-management.

Other tips and guidelines recommend breaking tasks into "time intervals" or "smaller, more manageable" chunks, "setting deadlines for the smaller tasks, as well as the larger ones," prioritizing your to-do list, and delegating responsibilities to co-workers or seeking help from friends (Jones; Walton; "How to stop"). Many of these seem, eerily, to correlate to Foucault's discussion of disciplinary time. Foucault asks "How can one organize profitable durations?" and answers it in a four step process: 1) "Divide duration into successive or parallel segments, each of which must end at a specific time;" 2) "organize these threads according to an analytic plan;" 3) "Finalize these temporal segments, decide on how long each will last and conclude it with an examination;" and 4) "Draw up series of series, lay down for each individual according to his level, his seniority, his rank..." (Foucault, "Discipline" 157-158).<sup>6</sup> Here again we see the examination. As mentioned earlier, the examination (as well as the confession) can be understood as implicit in the act of seeking 'expert' advice on procrastination: the procrastinator must continually test and monitor her time-management ability according to the techniques experts prescribe. If she is successful, perhaps she will be rewarded by the feeling of accomplishment (and potentially, identity) mentioned in one tip: "visualize

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<sup>6</sup> The recommendation to delegate seems to fit the least with Foucault's schema, but perhaps it is a form of dividing the "series of series" of tasks for each individual according to his differentiation – wherein the individual is expected to internalize and naturalize this process to the point that he can determine the assignment of tasks himself.

the end result and think about how you'll feel once the task is completed," (Jones). If she finds herself still lagging behind, 'punishment' in the form of 're-training' might be in order. In fact, the need to delineate and stick to these expert-specified guidelines in the first place is in a sense a form of the corrective, intensified training - as one who 'already knows' how to effectively manage his time presumably need not bother with focusing his attention on the remedial steps prescribed by procrastination 'experts.'

### **Other things said and not said: complicating the discourse of procrastination**

We have seen how the therapeutic discourse of procrastination produces knowledge that procrastination is an unhealthy and even immoral problem (in that it hurts your organization and those around you), as well as knowledge on how to solve it. This knowledge, circulated through this discourse, attempts to compel individuals into taking the responsibility upon themselves to effectively manage their productivity. And this power is not merely restrictive, telling individuals they can't watch *One Tree Hill* or sign onto *Facebook.com*, but also productive: an instance of normalizing power, it produces bodily behaviors and mental attitudes, shapes emotional states, and constitutes identities. Furthermore, this power can produce pleasures. As Foucault reminds us, we would never accept a system in which power was always repressive (Foucault, "History" 119). The discourse of procrastination is capable of producing such pleasures as those found in a hard-earned image of success, recognition from peers, and even the ability to manage oneself so as to negotiate as comfortably as possible in the system one is in.

However, in doing so, the discourse of procrastination does not stop to consider that not only might the real 'problem' of procrastination be structural or societal (a



problem, it bears emphasizing, that is produced by the very system that discovers it),<sup>7</sup> but also that procrastination might have its own ‘rationality.’ That is, the discourse does not allow room for the possibility that procrastination might be a useful way for individuals to assert a degree of autonomy into the temporal and affective dimensions of their everyday lives. Furthermore, there is no hint in this discourse that any one subject may be entirely uninterested in deriving her identity and/or sense of accomplishment from the organization she already has to consign her time and energy to just to pay the bills and survive in the world, nor that she may refuse the very assumption that stress is a constant necessity in living one’s life - in short, that other value systems are possible.<sup>8</sup>

However, these absences in the discourse around procrastination do not necessarily signal corresponding absences in other sites of time management – in how people understand, make use and describe their own negotiations in time-management. There may be moments in which these negotiations are enacted as resistance to the therapeutic discourses around procrastination (again, as Foucault tells us, resistance can be found anywhere and everywhere power is) (Foucault, “History” 95-96). At other moments, the discourse of procrastination may be partially embraced. It is likely that most moments contain a layering of resistance and more docile engagement, as subjects struggle to work out issues of temporality and affect in the complicated detail of their

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<sup>7</sup> For example, whereas procrastination ‘experts’ blame psychosomatic symptoms on the act or habit of procrastinating itself, sociologist Barbara Adam points to the dominating imposition of capitalist time upon the multiple temporalities of the body. Referring to experiments and studies she previously described, she says, “Collectively those studies demonstrate that the invariability of clock-time rhythms, sudden changes in established rhythms, and the superimposition of alien rhythms stress our capacity to synchronize and calibrate the multitude of psychological and social rhythm; in other words, they affect our well-being,” (47).

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this could partly be explained by the fact that those seeking out the statements of this discourse are already invested in living, however (un/)comfortably, within normative prescriptions of identity and behavior. Still, these same absences seem to exist in the wider discourse of professionalization and stress-management, and indeed often society in general.

everyday lives. In the second section of this paper I will explore how people may negotiate resistance to the discourse of procrastination, and how alternate modes of time management may be fashioned.

## TACTICAL PROCRASTINATION IN THE IMMATERIAL WORKPLACE

To explore the possibility of alternate understandings of procrastination and time management, I carried out a focus group study with six individuals who work or have recently worked in entry-level or near entry-level clerical/administrative positions at a large state university.<sup>9</sup> Thus the participants are not working in the corporate sector. And with the exception of one participant who has sometimes held part-time jobs of twenty to thirty hours a week, they all worked forty hour weeks according to a pre-determined, unchanging schedule (for example, nine to five, Monday through Friday). The participants have held a mix of temporary and permanent positions.

The focus group met three times in October and November of 2007; participants spoke about the ways in which they used tactics of procrastination to negotiate unequal power relations in the workplace.<sup>10</sup> They did not assume that procrastinating at work necessarily means they are 'lazy' or incompetent, as some stereotypes of temporary and clerical workers might suggest. As Loril Gosset states in "Falling Between the Cracks: Control and Communication Challenges of a Temporary Workforce," the behaviors of temporary employees that may lead to such stereotypes, "may be partially the result of the chaotic environment they operate within and not simply the result of personal failings or poor organizational fit," (Gossett 408). Gossett's point is important to this discussion

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<sup>9</sup> The name of the particular university will not be given, as this was a condition for IRB approval. Furthermore, the participants' names and specific information about their job descriptions, duties and daily lives have been changed to protect their identities.

<sup>10</sup> Here, I am borrowing the notion of "tactics" from Michel de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* he describes a "tactic" as "an art of the weak," a "calculated action" that "must play on and with a terrain imposed on it," taking advantage of opportunities as they arise (de Certeau 36-37).

because a lack of motivation is also associated with procrastination – particularly insofar as an incitement to ‘manage’ one’s procrastination is deployed as a ‘motivation’ to reach one’s idealized, professional image of self. My participants also reported working in a chaotic environment (whether they were in a temporary position or not) as a primary reason for turning to tactics of procrastination in the first place.

For example, one participant (while temping) found himself in a work environment in which he felt his supervisors and coworkers were disorganized and ‘unmotivated.’ One way this was apparent was in how his supervisors would often assign him a task, and then subsequently change that task several times.

**Tom:** One rule I’ve set for myself after bad experiences in the past is I don’t ever care about my responsibilities much more than they do. When I get an assignment, I usually wait a few days to proceed because I always know they [his supervisors] are going to change their minds... and that has saved so much work. They’ll change their mind three times that week and I’ll just lie and say, “Oh I’ve been working on it, but I’ll go back.” Then they apologize a whole lot, like “I’m so sorry you have to go back,” and I’m like “That’s all right...” And then I’ll finally start after a week and begin working again.... After being given instruction to do something, if you wait a week before you start, you never have to do it twice.

Thus Tom procrastinated completing some of his assignments (by chatting with friends, playing online video games, or browsing *wikipedia.org*) in order to not have to unnecessarily repeat a task, and did so in a way that also allowed him to maintain friendly relationships with his supervisors; he did not have to feel frustrated with them for their inefficiency because he himself was ‘managing’ his own, intentional inefficiency.<sup>11</sup>

Correspondingly, some participants reported using procrastination to *hide* their levels of productivity. This then enabled them to better set boundaries to protect

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<sup>11</sup> This example, in fact, shows how procrastination can actually be a tool *for* efficiency for workers in various situations. It is efficiency in the workers’ interest, rather than (just) the organizations, however, and an efficiency that allows the worker to negotiate the affective dimensions of work (by asserting a space for enjoyment through playing video games, for example), rather than experiencing the frustration of continually repeating the same task over and over again.

themselves from being taken advantage of in situations of unequal power relations (what do you do when a 'higher-up' asks – perhaps continuously asks - you to do something beyond your job description, sometimes to the point that you cannot take care of your official responsibilities?).

**Jeremy:** Occasionally people other than my boss ask me to do things for them that are in someone else's job description, not mine. When I was younger and I was trying to build up a reputation with the temp agency, if somebody asked me to do something I did it. I wanted good jobs and I wanted good reports, but every job has that one bitch who comes to your desk holding that giant box of something with that squinty smiley face and is like, "Oh, you're going to hate me," and I'm like – I already hate you! What's in that box is like three years worth of work that *you* haven't done, so you know, the guy with no health insurance has to do if I want to stay here another week. It's annoying. I feel like I get taken advantage of a lot less if you draw your boundaries with people – especially people who you think are stupid.

When a person who feels himself to be a productive and competent worker is in the sort of environment described above by Jeremy, procrastination becomes a tactic to implicitly set boundaries.

**Brianna:** I know for me and for other people the more you're in a job the more you know the tasks involved and the better you can do them... the better you do your job, the more quicker, the more efficiently, the more time you have to waste because you're getting it done faster.

**Will:** But you have to be careful not to let people know you're getting it done faster.

**Brianna:** And doing it well. And they'll ask you to do more.

According to participants, the only perceived result of taking on extra workload is being given an ever increasing workload as more co-workers discover you are efficient and willing to do extra tasks. The employment structure (policies, job classifications, pay grades, processes and ease of moving between or up in positions, etc.) made it difficult to gain financial compensation in a timely manner, if at all. In order to get a raise, employees must either 1) start the process of job re-classification, or 2) the

department in question would have to write a new job description, and begin the process of hiring the employee for the new position (including advertising the job on websites, interviewing other applicants, and so forth) (Focus group October 30, 2007). Each option requires the cooperation of one's supervisor. Will's story below provides an example of how abstract determinations such as unsupportive managers and "office politics" can put compensation for increased responsibilities out of reach. Will describes how he has usually approached jobs with the goal of improving them, only to have this energy effectively blocked when he ran into a problematic supervisor.

**Will:** When I first got in my job, it was okay. I've had about four jobs since I graduated college; the others were with private companies. I never had the problem of getting into a job – I'd get into the job, and I'd think, critically, hey, I can improve this job, and I can make things a little better. And I did that shit, and it was awesome, and everyone valued me in all these private places where I worked, and it was terrifical. And then I some how landed myself here, and it was really a set of bad luck – I got stuck and in my first year, at the job I'm at now, I remember thinking to myself, okay, we've got all these outside entities to work with, more than a hundred and fifty of them, and then we have all these people reporting back to me all the time, and this begs for a database. Which I knew nothing about at the time. And I decided to take the free time I had at work – which wasn't much because I was still learning the job too, and I'm going to learn access, and that's what I did, I taught myself access. And I wrote and I built the whole database, and it fucking kicks ass, by the way. It's really helpful to me – no one else knows how to use it, of course – so whenever anybody has any questions about any of these things, I'm like well, (*in lower voice*) "You can observe this query." And people are like, "That's great, but what can I do with this myself?" And I'm like, "Don't worry, I can totally export this as an excel spreadsheet, and you understand those, don't you?" And that was my first year and I was thinking okay I'll do all this extra stuff and get myself to a better spot – And after the first year, or year and half, or two years or so, everyone was like, "We have to get this guy somewhere else, we have to raise him up," and my office manager happens to be extremely unhelpful in this regard, and my other boss was like, "You've got to get this dude a higher position and more money, this is ridiculous," and she was adamant about not helping me. And he would go to her and be like, "You have to help him," and she'd be like, "I definitely will," and he'd let it go, and she would not help me in any way whatsoever, and so eventually, I was like, "Why don't I write out the goddamn job description, I'll write out what I actually fucking do and you can tell me what kind of job that is." And I did. And she said [*in a high pitched voice*], "That sounds great, this means I don't have to do shit." So I did it, and I sent it to her, and she was like, that doesn't fit into anything that we do here at the U [*general laughter*].

**Will:** Now I've actually taken all the initiative, I've written the job description, pulled rank on her to go to [the primary supervisor] to say, "Here, I've done it all, she doesn't have to do shit now, she just won't do it." And also she doesn't make any friends with people in other departments so people in Human Resources don't like her, so –

**Kate:** That's key.

**Will:** So that's why I'm depressed now. I've gotten to the point where I didn't even realize I'm more valuable than I am right now, and in a way you're opening up a... scar [*general laughter*]. A wound that I forgot that I had. And on the one hand I'm like, heyyyyy, I don't suck that bad –

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Will:** But on the other hand, mmm, I've allowed myself to get this far into it, so maybe I do deserve it.

Participants, however, reported a lack of options to getting "this far into it."

According to participants, if they were not satisfied with their current positions, they had to choose between transferring positions and quitting. If they transferred positions, they tended to make lateral moves; they also discussed a sort of 'brick wall' in administrative jobs after a certain job classification (Focus group October 30, 2007). Speaking again to chaotic work environments and lack of opportunities,

**Jeremy:** Staff are constantly frustrated with faculty who seem like absentminded people who don't know what it takes to keep this thing up and running, and it's like... we're all frustrated, let's... I don't know... when you're at the bottom, what can you do?

**Tom:** Quit.

**Kate:** Yeah, quit, that's basically it.

**Jeremy:** You can quit when it sucks, and to have that be your option occasionally blows.

**Kate:** Or you can protect your own time by procrastinating using creative strategies... [*laughter*].

Procrastination let participants set implicit boundaries to avoid increased (and uncompensated) workloads, but they also used procrastination to 'reclaim' hours and

energy they felt their jobs took from them. Some participants tried to make the time they spent procrastinating doubly productive for themselves: protecting their boundaries while also completing personal tasks they would otherwise have to do on ‘their own time’ (either after hours, or during lunch breaks).<sup>12</sup>

**Kate:** ...Most of us, I’m assuming, are at work at normal business hours, so it’s hard to do your banking business and crap like that – I don’t use up my breaks or lunch time, -hell no - so I’ll definitely take care of that kind of stuff [at work].

Some participants also used this time to complete administrative kinds of tasks for outside pursuits, such as sending emails about upcoming events.

**Brianna:** I’m [an artist] on the side and I don’t have the internet at home, so I’ll do anything related[to that] at work.

Other participants made their time spent procrastinating ‘work’ for them, in a sense, by using it to make them feel more ‘engaged’ at work – either through specific practices of procrastination, or through the very act of procrastination itself.

**Kate:** I try to avoid just wasting time, I always like to read ... I’ll teach myself how to do something new, or read about something that does somewhat enriches my life, even if it’s just compulsively reading the news.

Another participant, Will, sometimes procrastinated by learning Spanish through an online language program. Tom reported gaining a sense of ‘engagement’ by the idea of being caught procrastinating.

**Tom:** My personality can come into play a little more goofing off than doing work, and I think most people who have a really hard job get that stress [that is] completely related to their job and they’re awake and they’re in it. But I don’t

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<sup>12</sup> This points to an important privilege my focus group participants had: they were not only holding jobs in which they were able, to some degree, to use procrastination to negotiate power relations and workloads, but could, furthermore, use the time they spent procrastinating to build escape routes from their current situation. For example, one participant spoke of preparing applications for more attractive looking jobs while at work, and another worked on applications to graduate school. Other participants, though they had the same privilege, felt more ‘stuck’ where they were (indeed, this seemed to be the case for the participant who has worked the longest at this particular place of employment). This tendency to get ‘stuck’ corresponds to the inertia participants attributed to their workplace(s), and to the way they experienced their administrative jobs and underlying employment structure as eventually draining their self-confidence (see third section).



feel that way, I feel very separate from what I'm doing. So to have that opportunity where I can get scared and get tense – and I know this because I did have a job where I did the same kinds of admin work but couldn't goof off, I didn't have a lot of time with a computer with internet access – it sort of lacked that... that rush.

It makes the day interesting. I can't remember what I did at work on a particular day but I can remember what I read on wikipedia. When someone says hey what are you up to, I can [talk about what I learned], but if I talk about my job, they just get bored...

When asked what is at stake in workplace procrastination, several participants seemed to react more emotionally than they had on other topics, both in how they answered (gestures, tone of voice), and what they said.

**Will:** I use it to set the record at stake. That's what's at stake, is that they're taking things from me that I don't believe in, they're making me do things that make me feel less Will-ish. I witness myself changing and I just don't accept it, I don't like it, so I take back every moment that I can because it's mine, and I feel like the whole job structure isn't useful, it's not fair. I don't like what it does to me, so it kind of balances things out – I'm Libra! [laughter] So I'm just trying to set the record straight, really.

Being forced into a situation with all these bad vibes... I don't want to get respect from the workplace, because I don't think there is any respect in the workplace. There's really something wrong.

**Ashley:** I feel like I never felt guilty when I procrastinated at work, because the only thing I felt bad about was going home at 5 [p.m.] and realizing I just wasted nine entire hours of my life – I didn't go out and take any pictures, I didn't create something in Photoshop, I didn't make a website, I didn't write a story, I didn't do anything that I actually like doing with my time. I felt like when I went to work, seriously the most valuable thing I'd do in a day was talk to my aunt on Instant Messenger who just lost her husband. I felt like that was me doing something good for someone else, and that was the only good thing about my day – so it wasn't really a matter if I felt bad about looking at Postsecret<sup>13</sup> instead of putting information in a database.

Finally, Kate in particular spoke of a sort of economy of time and energy, using procrastination to, again, 'recover' a sense of having time.

**Kate:** I think it's really interesting – you [Will] keep talking about time – and that's really what's at stake, for me. At any kind of structure, whether its work or school, I constantly feel this lack of time – it's just the feeling that time is being stolen from you because you're forced to work in this structure. So I try to get that back by making myself a better person, and learning things – everything I use to procrastinate at work is to enrich myself or to gain some knowledge, I

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<sup>13</sup> Ashley is referring to the blog *postsecret.blogspot.com*.

think that's always because my job sucks that out of me, my desire to do better and to learn more things. because [the job] is so freakin' boring and it *isn't* me... so I feel like I have to use that time I feel is being stolen to make up for that. I thought that I'd like [this job] better than my old one – and it is more interesting than my previous administrative job.... But it's still the same mind numbing boring work, not challenging, actively [*laughs softly*] [*in fake voice*] is sucking my will to live! It saps my motivation to do anything else, I feel like I constantly have to wrestle that off to do anything else.

A few minutes later, she said:

**Kate:** ...Not only are you spending that required time at work, it affects your own free time, and you don't have the energy to do the stuff that you want to do. So it's like, crap - if I spend my best waking hours at work, then I better use that time to do the stuff that I want to do, because they're stealing my best hours of the majority of my day. And I don't feel bad about that at all. I definitely use procrastination to deal with my low energy times too – I'll do more lazy procrastinatory things when I have low energy, things like passively read something rather than actively deal with my inbox...

Participants, then, spoke of alternate uses and understandings of procrastination than those allowed for in the therapeutic discourse. They often engaged in tactics of delay intentionally, to craft some kind of autonomy in negotiating workloads, energy levels and even selfhood. How they felt about engaging in procrastination, however, was often involved a complicated array of affective and emotional states, inclusive of anxiety (both unwelcome and intentional), at times enjoyment, and an increased feeling of engagement or of a 'sense of self.' The third and final section of this project will explore the affective relationship participants expressed in regard to their own procrastination, after first analyzing the particular affective states and emotions that the therapeutic discourse attempts to deploy.

## AFFECTIVE POLITICS

The space of affective relations in each discourse on procrastination is complex, consisting of a variety of emotional states (such as guilt, shame and humiliation) as well as affective states that may best be described as ‘feelings’ rather than emotions per se (for example, anxiety, hopelessness, enjoyment and ‘sense of self’).<sup>14</sup> I will concentrate my focus on the particular affective states that seem to be doing the most work in the discourses around procrastination: in the therapeutic discourse, guilt-shame, fear-anxiety; in the alternative discourse of my focus group, discomfort, which in turn consists primarily but not exclusively of anxiety and sense of self.

To interpret the affective politics at work in the discourses around procrastination as described above, I am largely relying on the framework provided by Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Though she focuses on how emotions move people into different relationships to each other and to larger structures such as national identity, rather than on how affect is articulated to temporality and discourses of time management, her description of emotions is useful in understanding emotions as not simply biological and individual ‘properties,’ but as cultural and social practices that work on the social body, deploying and/or reaffirming particular power relations.

Ahmed describes guilt and shame as arising from the same affective dimension but differing in their ‘aboutness’: “Guilt implies action, while shame implies that some

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<sup>14</sup> Here, following cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg, I am understanding affect as “energy invested in particular sites,” and emotional states as arising from affective states but articulated to ‘ideological narratives,’ (whereas affective states are not organized according to particular narratives or meanings) (Grossberg 81, 397). A ‘feeling,’ then, may describe an area in between affect and emotion – attributed with some ‘sense’ of meaning, but not to the extent that emotions are.

quality of the self has been brought into question,” (Ahmed 105). For Ahmed, individuals feel guilt when they understand themselves as having done something bad (for example, missing a deadline), and they feel shame when they attribute that ‘badness’ to themselves (being a person who misses deadlines, being undependable, irresponsible, etc) (105). Thus it seems if guilt and shame are distinguishable emotional states cut from the same affective fabric, and, furthermore, that guilt can move to shame without excluding the feelings of guilt. However, shame involves more than the self’s relationship to the self; it is about how the self appears to a witnessing other with whom one identifies, and thus is already invested in (Ahmed 103, 105, 106).

In shame, I am the object as well as the subject of the feeling. Such an argument crucially suggests that shame requires an identification with the other who, as witness, returns the subject to itself. The view of this other is the view that I have taken on in relation to myself” I see myself *as if I were* this other. My failure before this other hence is profoundly a failure of myself to myself. In shame, I expose to myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other (105, italics in the original text).

This witnessing other will become important in understanding both the operation of shame and its limitations as a deployment of power in the therapeutic discourse on procrastination.

Fear and anxiety constitute another complex affective dimension. For Ahmed, fear is about the approach (and ‘passing by’) *of* an object, while anxiety is an approach *to* objects (66). Whereas guilt seems to take specific objects (‘bad’ actions), both fear and anxiety seem to be better described as orientations toward potential objects. Fear has a temporal aspect; it is oriented to the future, to the approach of an object that the subject reads as ‘fearsome’ (65). As Ahmed describes,

It is the futurity of fear which makes it possible that the object of fear, rather than arriving, might pass us by. But the passing by of the object of fear does not mean the overcoming of fear: rather, the possibility of the loss of the object makes

what is fearsome all the more fearsome. If fear had an object, then fear could be contained by the object. When the object of fear threatens to pass by, then fear can no longer be contained by an object (65).

When fear ‘leaks’ from its initial object, it becomes displaced onto other objects that are then also read as ‘fearsome,’ creating the effect of the subject ‘running away’ from objects of fear (67). Thus fear seems to involve a backwards-moving orientation to objects. Anxiety, on the other hand, seems to involve a forward-moving (searching) orientation to objects. According to Ahmed, anxiety, unlike fear, does not start with an object; instead objects only “come to life” as anxiety touches them in its continuous movement from one object to another (66). Ahmed describes this continuous movement as “detachment” from any specific or perhaps initial object: “One thinks of more and more ‘things’ to be anxious about; the detachment from a given object allows anxiety to accumulate through gathering more and more objects...” (66).<sup>15</sup> Thus the work of anxiety is to intensify and reinforce itself, although, as I argue, not necessarily always to the exclusion of other affective states.

Discomfort, for example, is a particular mode of ‘feeling’ that may include a number of affective or emotional states, including anxiety. Rather than discussing discomfort in terms of a specific affective state with a particular relationship to an object (or objects), Ahmed describes discomfort as “a feeling of disorientation” that can arise

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<sup>15</sup> Here, Ahmed also says that anxiety “overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world,” (66). I would argue that anxiety only *tends* to overwhelm other affective relations, emphasizing the word “tends” because it suggests 1) that anxiety does not necessarily always do this work, and 2) that this work is never fully enacted nor ‘finished’. That is, while anxiety may often work to ‘push out’ other affective relations, other emotions (arising from other affective relations) may merely be diminished (to varying degrees in different moments). And, as feelings of anxiety vacillate (depending on a multitude of possible factors), other affective relations may also become alternately more and less possible and/or experienced. This becomes relevant to my project, as I will argue that anxiety is one of the feelings constituting the ‘discomfort’ that my focus group participants seemed to experience in relation to their tactics of procrastination.

through “*inhabiting norms differently*” (148, 155, emphasis in the original text).<sup>16</sup>

Ahmed is careful to note that individuals cannot somehow live *outside* of norms; one is still shaped by the norms one resists or fails at upholding (152). However, this failure can be generative, “insofar as it does not end with the failure of norms to be secured, but with possibilities of living that do not ‘follow’ those norms through,” (155).<sup>17</sup> That is, failing norms not only call attention to the ways specific norms are *not* necessary (both to the failing subject and to observing others), but may furthermore suggest the possibility of other modes of living (perhaps even the shape such alternative modes may take). In addition, this failure points to the affective ambivalence of discomfort: discomfort can carry with it negative affects and also enjoyment of negative affects through “failing to reproduce norms” as a potential “political and ethical alternative” (146). Thus, individuals tactically negotiating the norms of professionalism and time management may feel anxiety (and to some extent enjoyment of anxiety) and a feeling of a ‘sense of self’ through discomfort.

This ‘sense of self’ may also be best described as a ‘feeling.’<sup>18</sup> If affect can be understood as an investment, “a description of how and how much we care” about

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<sup>16</sup> Comfort, on the other hand, may be hard to identify for the comfortable subject: “To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins,” (148). Comfortable subjects are able to ‘fit into’ a world that has already taken their shape, just as they have already been shaped by that world (through taking up dominant norms). This comfort is “the effect of the work of others,” who—again—inhabit norms differently. Thus, “The availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labor of others, and the burden of concealment,” (of one’s discomfort and labor) (149).

<sup>17</sup> Just as comfort is more available to some individuals than others, so to is the ‘option’ (itself less a choice than an effect of norms and inequalities already circulating in society) to live in discomfort to norms: some lives, as a matter of survival, may need to (at least appear to) live within a closer relationship to the norms (151).

<sup>18</sup> Here I am departing from Ahmed’s framework; she does not discuss a ‘sense of self’ or ‘engagement’ (as I have also referred to it).

particular sites (Grossberg 397), then ‘sense of self’ is the particular feeling that arises from being (in the moment) engaged in the sites in which one has invested one’s selfhood.<sup>19</sup> For example, someone invested in the norms of time management may correspondingly be invested in the activity of completing tasks in a consistently punctual manner, and feel an increased ‘sense of self’ through working steadily on his or her “to do” list. If one has not invested one’s selfhood in one’s job or career, that person may feel actively ‘drained’ (especially considering affect is an investment of *energy*) by routinely working on tasks that one is not invested in to the exclusion of activities that one *is* invested in. The tactically procrastinating subject may feel an increased ‘sense of self’ by creating moments in which he can engage in sites and activities he *has* invested in, that help make him ‘feel like himself’: by, for example, reading a cooking blog to learn new recipes if he considers cooking to be an important or rewarding pursuit. Furthermore, in the context of discomfort, an individual may feel a ‘sense of self’ from the very negotiation of norms, insofar as one is invested in opposing or reworking (to different degrees) those norms. Thus, within discomfort, an increased sense of self can be felt alongside other affects and emotions, such as guilt and anxiety.

### **In the Popular Therapeutic Discourse on Procrastination**

In my reading of the therapeutic discourse, guilt-shame and fear-anxiety seem to be the primary affective dimensions strategically deployed to produce docile, productive subjects. It should be emphasized that my project here is not to measure the degree of ‘success’ the discourse may enjoy, nor is it a comment on whether self-help readers

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<sup>19</sup> This sense of self can vary in intensity, depending on the degree to which one is invested in any one particular site of engagement.

‘really’ feel these emotions ‘due’ to this discourse,’ but rather it is to map out the contours of its affective dimensions.

As stated earlier, guilt involves attributing ‘badness’ to specific actions the self has engaged in (105). In the therapeutic discourse, procrastination is nothing if not the badness of the particular form of action that is the delay of action, or temporary inaction. After all, procrastination results in negative consequence to both self and other: “putting your health at risk,” “frittering away” company time, poor performance on tasks, accruing presumably “staggering” costs to the business one works for, and so on (“How to Stop,” Mathieu, Basu, Zane). In an article in *The Globe and Mail*, procrastination is called a “bad habit” (Walton). Just the fact that procrastination is taken as a problem that requires address to begin with stipulates the ‘badness’ of this particular ‘action.’ By connecting procrastination to ‘badness,’ by taking it as a problem – a “prevalent and pernicious” one at that – and by associating procrastination with negative consequences, the discourse attempts to deploy guilt to prevent the reading subject from engaging in this ‘bad action’ herself (Walton).

Shame is deployed more subtly in some instances of the discourse; that is the discourse suggests the possibility of shame rather than depicting shame as necessarily (already) happening (and not every article I examined seems to suggest shame). The articles that suggest shame depict an image of a pathologized “procrastinator.” This is a slide from ‘bad action’ (acts of procrastination, soliciting guilt) to ‘bad self’ (procrastinators). However, shame need only apply to anyone who has taken up this “maladaptive lifestyle,” as the *Chicago Tribune* quotes Ferrari: “‘Everybody procrastinates but not everyone is a procrastinator,’” (B. Rose). Chronic procrastinators –



rather than people who simply procrastinate from time to time – *are* certain things: they are “impulsive;” they are not very self aware; they are “excusemakers;” they are fearful (of failure or success) (Olsen, B. Rose).<sup>20</sup> These ‘bad’ attributes even enable experts to categorize procrastinators according to types (as discussed in the first section): arousal, avoider and decisional (Oleck). Furthermore, as also stated earlier, procrastinators are pathologized as people who manage their tasks and schedules according to their moods and emotions, rather than according to the demands of their tasks and schedules. The *Detroit Free Press* article quotes a family practice physician, Dr. Matthew Ewald, who has patients who are “chronic procrastinators:” “A true procrastinator relies more on moods and feelings. Not being in the mood to work on a task is reason enough not to do it for that person,” (Oleck). This suggests that procrastinators satisfy their own desires at the expense of others. As the article continues:

Such is the life for procrastinators – those who wait until the last minute to begin something they’ve been meaning to do and had ample time to complete (taxes, anyone?), nearly blowing deadlines and often causing tension with bosses and co-workers or friction in relationships.

The *National Post* seems to concur: “Spending too much time on personal issues will turn into missed deadlines, shoddy projects and resentment in the workplace, as other people are forced to pick up the slack,” (Mathieu). The inclusion of other effected people in what otherwise may be a simple deployment of guilt is key, since shame is about identifying with the other who witness your ‘badness.’ The others referenced are particular others the procrastinating subject may likely be invested in: coworkers,

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<sup>20</sup> This lack of self-awareness, discussed in the first section, works to necessitate expert intervention. Furthermore, in this context, it seems as like a shameful attribute itself: the self has invested in a particular identity that the observing other ‘knows’ to be false; the self is revealed as thinking he is better than he ‘actually’ is in front of the other. An example of this can be seen in this passage from the *Chicago Tribune* article. “Avoiders sometimes tell themselves and others they are perfectionists, explaining, ‘Unless it’s really up to my standards, I don’t want you to have it [an assignment].’ But true perfectionists want to get ahead, while chronic procrastinators simply want to get along, Ferrari says.” (B. Rose).

supervisors and loved ones. Their observation of the subject's failure is underscored by the way these others are imagined to be forced to deal with the material repercussions, by picking up the procrastinator's 'slack.' *Your* 'bad action' stemming from *your* 'badness' means that those close to you have to do the work that you are not doing.

The deployment of guilt and shame works to provide the affective exigency for the individual to be 'responsibilized' in such a way that he internalizes and performs the role of the expert to/for himself. It is not hard to imagine 'disciplined' individuals keeping themselves on task by envisioning scenarios in which they are shamed for procrastination that has not (yet) taken place; in fact this would be the very situation engendered by applying the internalized and routinized examination. Indeed, Ahmed allows that shame can be experienced via imagining the other witnessing: "I imagine how it will be seen as I commit the action, and the feeling of badness is transferred to me," (106). When deployed effectively, the therapeutic discourse around procrastination would have its docile subjects imagining procrastination-engendered shame in such a way that they strive to avoid procrastination and take it upon themselves to 're-train' themselves according to 'proper' time management techniques in the moments in which avoidance fails.

Furthermore, Ahmed asserts that shame can work to 'reintegrate' subjects to social norms shared by a community: "my shame confirms my love, and my commitment to such ideals in the first place," (Ahmed 106). Here Ahmed is using 'love' to set the framework for her discussion of the politics of shame in regards to building, sustaining and reaffirming nationhood (the nation as a site of investment); however, since I am discussing what is, at least in the majority of cases, a less intense site, I will merely

use the word ‘investment.’<sup>21</sup> In terms of the discourse of procrastination, the investment to be confirmed could be in the norms (through which one derives one’s ‘professional’ identity) or even in one’s relationship to one’s coworkers (who, if they share investment in the same norms, may have some power to question – through shame – one’s commitment to the norms or one’s success at adhering to them, and thus one’s professional identity). The shared commitment to norms builds and sustains the community, and shame can be used to reaffirm this community insofar as it acts as an acknowledgement of one’s failure to reproduce norms one is committed to (106). Thus, a community works to produce and reinforce particular norms, just as norms produce and reinforce such communities. Here, the community could be one’s coworkers and supervisors, who may also share and reinforce norms of professionalization and time management, or an imagined community of professionals who share such norms.

Shame as a way of binding subjects to communities and norms points to both the ambivalence of shame and its temporality: the shameful failure to uphold norms must be seen as temporary in order to recommit oneself to upholding them in the future (107). The procrastinating subject is pulled from the present (where one feels shame) to the future (where one may be able to leave shame behind). This may be where subjectification has the potential to do the most work, when one considers how, in the discourse of professionalism, the identity as professional is always held out in the future, just out of reach of the subject. Success in upholding norms is never static or secure, failure is always possible, and thus one is never ‘done’ reaching one’s professional identity: there is always more work to do. The discourse of professionalism, when

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<sup>21</sup> According to Ahmed, when a nation ‘fails’ to live up to its ideals, national shame is taken to indicate that “we mean well,” and thus reconfirms the nation as a site for love (Ahmed 109).

articulated to the deployment of shame in the therapeutic discourse around procrastination, always holds the specter of shame in front of the potentially procrastinating subject: propelling the subject to endeavor to be as productive as possible, as he chases a future that is never secured (because of the possibility of failure and shame) but always promised (through ideals of success and identity).

However, the necessity of (at least an imagined) observing other *whom one is invested in* marks the limits of shame as a technique or deployment of power: one must already have registered some level of investment in either the norms of professionalism themselves or in a community that in turn values those norms in order for shame to work as the affective glue that pulls the faltering, procrastinating subject back into the fold. As will be shown with my focus group participants, this initial investment cannot be guaranteed in advance and thus shame – and even guilt (which seems to require less) – do not always take hold of the procrastinating subject. Perhaps, though, the affective glue of shame (that attempts to stick the subject to norms of time management) is strengthened by anxiety. Anxiety, again, is related to fear, but whereas fear is a backwards movement away from objects read as ‘fearsome,’ anxiety looks forward in its continuous search for objects – it is an approach to objects (in both senses of the word) (66). The therapeutic discourse on procrastination reads procrastinating subjects as full of fear: they shrink back from deadlines because they are afraid that if they complete their task, it will be judged a failure; or because they are afraid if they succeed, they will be asked to do more (B. Rose). Perhaps the positing of procrastinators as fearful works to strengthen the discourse’s implicit call for them to be anxious: you are *that*, but/thus you should be *this*. The discourse seems to ask subjects to be anxious through asking them to continuously

look for moments in which they may not be working hard enough, quickly enough or effectively enough (“Am I procrastinating too much in this moment? What about this one? Did I get enough done on this task? What about that task? Did I leave anything undone?” and so on).<sup>22</sup> Even when anxiety does not successfully keep subjects from procrastinating, it at least serves to keep them thinking of themselves as procrastinators, as subjects who *should* be working more and better. Anxiety is also at work in the subject’s relationship to shame-observing/instilling others (107); the individual invested in norms of time management may continuously try to identify others who may observe and judge her failings, and, correspondingly, moments in which this may happen. Taken together, this suggests that anxiety could reinforce both the role of the internalized expert, who must continuously perform self-examinations, and the work of (the possibility of) shame. That is, considering that anxiety tends to intensify itself (66), I would like to speculate that the articulation of anxiety with shame (and shaming others) works to include more and more others who *can* produce shame in the subject, and hence, lessens the degree of required initial investment in the other.

### **In tactical workplace procrastination**

While guilt-shame and fear-anxiety seem to dominate the operation of the disciplining therapeutic discourse of procrastination, the participants in the focus group study described and seemed to perform a different and at least equally complex range of affective relationships to their crafting of modes of time management. I will begin by situating their affective states around procrastination according to how they have invested

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<sup>22</sup> The subject is asked to be anxious, while still, of course, managing such feelings appropriately so as not to interfere with one’s productivity.

(or resisted investing) in their jobs in the first place. Then, I will explore how their varying feelings toward and around procrastination can be understood as – again, following Ahmed – living in ‘discomfort’ to norms, a discomfort that can entail unwelcome anxiety, intended anxiety, and varying feelings of selfhood.<sup>23</sup>

Each participant described a lack of investment in their jobs as a source of identity – in fact, each participant asserted a intentional resistance to placing his/her identity in his/her job. One said he intentionally looked for a job with the state in order to avoid ‘corporate culture’ and to be able to better protect his selfhood. Others also referenced doing administrative work specifically to protect identities (or sense of self) that came from outside projects rather than their jobs. Thus, each participant from the start lived at odds with the norms of the discourse of professionalization. However, trying to protect a sense of self outside of or beyond paid employment turned out to be more difficult than just choosing to fill a particular position with a particular institution.

Participants often met with expectations from co-workers that assumed they would be invested in the norms of professionalism, that they would derive their sense of self from the workplace and that they should be striving to develop a career. One participant, who worked part-time in order to support outside projects, said:

**Brianna:** You’re supposed to feel like your job is your identity. I chose to work part time, specifically because I didn’t want my selfhood tied to a job. But co-workers would say things like, “You’re so smart, why are you slacking off? Why aren’t you working more?” And it’s hard to answer that question because the follow up would always be, “Well, I have all these hopes and dreams you don’t know about...” And ultimately, that’s the part of me I was trying to protect by having this job. I didn’t want them in on that world.

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<sup>23</sup> Again, while I am concentrating on these particular feelings, they are not necessarily the only affective states and emotions present in participants’ discomfort (some also referenced a feeling of hopelessness, or at times pleasure, for example).

Another thing that eroded the identity borders participants tried to craft was simply the number of hours they clocked. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild speaks of the ‘gravitational pulls’ of home and work (Hochschild, “The Time Bind” *xviii-xxv*). For the focus group participants, spending even just thirty or forty hours a week at work constituted a significant ‘gravitational pull’ in terms of selfhood and affective experience. These hours were spent doing what felt to them to be boring, repetitive tasks, and thus, rather than giving them a sense of accomplishment, actively drained their feelings of selfhood.

**Kate:** I find it hard to figure out what I’m really capable of, truly, as a person, when all I have to gauge that is my current job and how effective I am at procrastinating while still getting the job done. I have no idea what my potential could really be, so I constantly underestimate my potential... I think working [here] has contributed to me more and more selling myself short.

**Brianna:** I actually feel the same way; you get trapped in this weird university world.... Because the university is set up to keep you in a position as long as possible.

**Kate:** You develop low professional self esteem.

Participants tried to adapt to this feeling by also using procrastination to feel a greater ‘sense of self,’ as discussed in the previous section, and it is in these moments that participants said they felt they got the most out of their time.

**Brianna:** Using procrastination to learn about something or to do something that is personal to me, or helps me assert to myself who I am – that’s what’s best for me.

**Kate:** I feel like I get the most of procrastination when I am taking care of things for my personal life – it keeps me from being stressed in my own time.

**Tom:** For me it’s making someone laugh at work. I talk to [a childhood friend] on IM at work, and we make each other laugh. It feels really good to realize I can still connect with him and that I can still be funny even though I am where I am.

**Will:** Any of these activities – being funny with your friends, learning a new skill, refining a skill you care about – these help you point yourself to the person you want to be, to be a person you like even better.

However, the effectiveness of using procrastination in this manner was further complicated by the way participants found themselves at the intersections of various norms, not all of which they rejected as directly as they did norms of professionalism. In fact, they actively engaged in some such norms. For example, Kate said she did not in general have a problem finding selfhood in a career; she just did not want to associate her sense of self with the specific positions she has held so far. Other participants who found work as a site of identity investment less desirable were still invested in fulfilling their (compensated) job obligations, delivering a good ‘product,’ and not letting their procrastination negatively effect the work of their co-workers. They did believe, though, that they could successfully do such things while employing more autonomous time management tactics, and, further, that they needed to use procrastination if they did not want to open themselves up to uncompensated workloads. Negotiating norms they invested in, norms they wished to reject as well as the structure implicit in their employment meant that participants reported ambivalent feelings about procrastination. Some reported being able to enjoy procrastination in some moments; some described a pervasive feeling of anxiety. Tom, as discussed in the previous section, said he often felt anxiety in procrastination because he associated it as doing something ‘bad’ even though he also felt like he was appropriately fulfilling his job responsibilities. The anxiety he reported was about the possibility of being ‘caught.’ Yet, for him, anxiety was in some sense pleasurable because it helped him feel engaged.<sup>24</sup> For Will, on the other hand, anxiety seemed tied to feelings of hopelessness. Will identified this hopelessness, in turn, coming from several different sources. He felt the particular ways he procrastinated in no

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<sup>24</sup> Tom’s account also seemed to suggest a sense of guilt – by engaging in ‘bad actions’ – which may either be in some sense pleasurable as well, or at least was not so un-pleasurable it kept him from seeking the pleasure of anxiety.



way helped him reach an as yet unidentified “life cause,” and that he might in fact never discover this “life cause.” He did feel that any goal he created would not “fit with ‘success,’ whatever that might be.” Although Will did not feel like he *should* feel anxiety for having different goals, this sense of hopelessness and anxiety was exacerbated by coming into regular contact with people at work who – like the supervisor he admired – “take it very personally” that “we don’t have the same view on life.” In a sense, Will’s anxiety is produced by the friction between the way he thought he might want to live his life, the norms he did not want to adopt, and the ‘gravitational pull’ of the investments of those close to him (Focus group 27 November 2007).

Kate said she felt a regular and pervasive sense of anxiety around her procrastination because she did not want her co-workers to view her negatively in the case that her procrastination had ‘repercussions’ for others (even though she also said she did fulfill tasks on time and effectively). This seems to indicate that she felt the pull of the discourse around procrastination, which, as I have argued, deploys anxiety as a technique of subjectification to keep subjects thinking in terms set by the discourse. Perhaps she had more of herself invested in this particular position than she wanted or found ‘reasonable,’ or perhaps she merely wanted to maintain non-antagonistic social relations with her co-workers as much as possible. In either case, she still procrastinated, and in various moments found procrastination necessary and/or useful, but the discourse around procrastination seemed to keep pulling her close(r) to norms of professionalism through anxiety.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> It seems relevant here that Kate also described receiving conflicting signals from her supervisor, who would at times ask Kate to listen to her personal problems, at other times praise and rely on her work, and at other times confront Kate with complaints that for Kate seemed to lack context (she received no prior warnings or indicators of dissatisfaction). Thus Kate seemed to have one of the more tumultuous day-to-

Thus procrastination is often a double-edged sword. For example, even though procrastination meant anxiety for Kate, she also said procrastination was a way to assert more autonomy in deciding what she cared about.

**Kate:** I do care about the product that comes out... [but] at a certain point no one notices if it's that much better. So as far as procrastination goes, it helps me... feel better about myself for learning different things [rather than] just putting myself into this job that I know I don't really like. It [the job] doesn't give me self-satisfaction, so I get satisfied by teaching myself other things in my procrastination time that I find to be valuable.

In this way, procrastination helped her create spaces of time to 'feel better' at work even as she also felt anxiety.

In fact, procrastination seemed to be the most affectively 'useful' for participants in moments when they were conscious of turning to procrastination for specific reasons – to feel more like themselves – than when procrastination became more of a habit incorporated into the workday as a way to protect against increased, uncompensated workloads.<sup>26</sup> Feeling this 'sense of self' could entail engaging in an activity that they have invested themselves in (for example, with Kate, learning something new) or reclaiming a feeling of selfhood and/or self-respect through the very negotiation of norms. Jeremy, for example, used procrastination to affirm a sense of self-respect by asserting at least a slighter degree of autonomy than what may generally be allowed for in hierarchical workplace relationships.

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day work situations, requiring of her a great deal of affective labor in trying to manage relations with her supervisor. This relationship may be part of what 'pulls' Kate toward feeling anxious about what co-workers think of her work.

<sup>26</sup> It was in the routinization of procrastination as a perceived necessity that procrastination came to feel 'like work' to participants – a feeling that seems appropriate considering, again, the function of this kind of labor in enabling at least marginally dissatisfied employees to return to the workplace day after day, and in allowing them to manage themselves rather than 'become a problem' (by quitting, by neglecting rather than merely delaying tasks, or by organizing and attempting to change the structures they found problematic).

**Jeremy:** If someone came to me to say, “I need you to do something for me, come with me,”.... Whether I have to or not, I will often tell them that I’ll meet them [there] just so I don’t have to feel humiliated following someone down a hallway to something that will be terrible once I’m there. I’ll use my looking-busy-ness to reconfigure my own headspace before I get there and not have my gearshifts done on their schedule. There’s an enjoyment to that. Once you do it you feel better, because it’s like, god, these people don’t run my life. And I feel better about the circumstances under which this takes place. I’m not just being yanked out off whatever I may or may not have been doing at the time. ....I don’t knock on people’s doors and ask them to, “Come with me please.” It’s a tone thing, I think.

Here, Jeremy procrastinated, however slightly, in responding to requests that he felt took advantage of his position as a lower-level administrative employee in order to avoid “humiliation” and assert and maintain self-respect.<sup>27</sup> However, even as he described this way of asserting boundaries at work, he also expressed some uncertainty as to whether this made him a “jerk” or a “dick,” – thus suggesting a degree of friction with or ‘pull’ towards norms of time management. Similarly, Kate described delaying last minute requests, “half as revenge, half as teaching them a lesson in respecting someone else’s time,” which also reminded her that her time is valuable.<sup>28</sup>

Procrastination does not have to ‘yield’ exclusively or even primarily positive affect in order to do something for the procrastinator, however. It is not the delay itself that is important, but rather, its function in providing (some) individuals the opportunity to craft spaces and tactics for alternate modes of time management. This, then, provides

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<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, he provides the example of someone requesting at 4:45 a task that must be completed by 5 pm, not considering the length of time the task may require and expecting him to ‘deal with it’ since his ‘lower’ position gives him less feasible ways to directly respond.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting that aside from Will, male participants (Tom and Jeremy) reported less feelings of unwelcome anxiety than the female participants, Brianna and Kate (Ashley did not describe herself as feeling very anxious of feeling that her level of anxiety was a predominant problem for her, although she may sometimes feel anxious procrastinating). Although the sample here is too small to generalize, this apparent gender difference could be attributed to both the way masculinized activities tend to be more valued in our society than feminized activities (such as clerical work), as well as the disproportionate socialization women face in juggling demands of ‘their time’ versus ‘other people’s/institution’s time.’ Thus, Jeremy and Tom may feel less discomfort in asserting boundaries, however implicitly, or even enjoying the anxiety of procrastination.

them with a feeling (if not the reality) of increased autonomy and control over how they experience temporality, what norms they want to take up, and what norms they want to inhabit differently. In fact, it was through the very negative affect of depression that Jeremy began to craft his own more-autonomous ways of negotiating norms, both temporal and professional.

**Jeremy:** I had this day when I was working at [an earlier position] where I melted down for several days. My dad had told me [what to do in job interviews and in jobs themselves] – how you’re supposed to dress, how you’re supposed to talk to people... I was really making the maximum amount of effort that I had on anything since getting out of school. This is how a job is supposed to be. I was in that system and trying to do [the things his father told him] and none of it was working, I’m only feeling worse and I’m wearing uncomfortable clothes and my shirt’s tucked in and I hate these shoes.... None of it affects the work I’m doing or how well I’m doing it. It felt like a mixture of abject depression and apathy, where you don’t care anymore, but it’s also a horrible relief to Just. Not. Care. Anymore. If someone wants to give me crap about the fact that I’m wearing tennis shoes instead of loafers and technically we’re not supposed to in an office where no one [from coordinating departments or from the public] even comes in... I’m wearing shoes for other people who are wearing the same kind of shoes around the office and it doesn’t make any fucking sense at all. I don’t have to impress these people. It’s not procrastination but procrastination becomes a part of that. It was either I start figuring out how to do things my own way, or I show up and quit, and if [you don’t want to or cannot feasibly quit yet] then you just say, You know what? I’m going to wear my own shoes. I’m prepared to defend my desire to wear my own shoes, and if they want to fire me... we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. And if you fire me, then you’re going to get rid of someone who can do this job and do it well, but get out of my final frontier at least. You’re not allowed in here anymore.

## CONCLUSION

As Sara Ahmed asserts, such negotiations of “‘not quite’ living in the norms” may carry with them the ‘costs’ of anxiety or depression (or other negative affects) (146). According to Ahmed, “Discomfort is not simply a choice or decision – ‘I feel uncomfortable about this or that’ - but an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or ‘extend’ their shape” (152). This discomfort in relation to norms, however, provides the potential for reworking the norms, partly by exposing them (152). The apparent ‘failure’ of norms of professionalism and of dominant modes of time management, then, can provide the material for procrastinators to imagine other ways of crafting more autonomous modes of being in other areas of life. Those who choose ‘purposeful’ procrastination and reject therapeutic norms perhaps can begin to craft their own tactics of alternate time management. Such choices may – although by no means necessarily *will* – also provide the groundwork for more direct, oppositional and organized actions aimed at changing the structures that ‘produce’ both the ‘problem’ of procrastination and its ‘necessity’ in the workplace: for working towards greater worker autonomy (not just for those privileged enough to be able to procrastinate in the first place, but also those who find themselves in more oppressive workplace conditions), for challenging popular discourses associated with governing the subject, for working for the recognition of temporalities other than capitalist, time-is-money “clock time.” Thus, procrastination, as a ‘problem’ that is variable is variably produced, studied, engaged in, managed, worried over, embraced, made use of, struggled over and negotiated, is

embedded in a range of contemporary issues and questions such as the politics of emotions and the 'work' emotions do, especially in conjunction with other emotions; dominant attitudes and ways of thinking about time, the body and emotions, in Western society; everyday negotiations and struggles around governmentality; how power relations are deployed and negotiated in the immaterial workplace; self-help discourse; and relations of capitalism and temporality. Because it is poised in and among so many aspects of contemporary society, analyzing the discourses and practices around procrastination can provide a platform for better understanding the affective, temporal subject and from which to build libratory interventions.

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