



# Delay or procrastination – A comparison of self-report and behavioral measures of procrastination and their impact on affective well-being



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## ABSTRACT

A short-term longitudinal study ( $N = 162$  undergraduate students) replicates and extends previous findings on the relationship between self-reported procrastination and behavioral measures of procrastination (i.e., a comparison between actual and planned study time), and assesses their relation with affective well-being. All variables were measured 16 times over the course of 8 weeks. State measured self-reported and behavioral procrastination correlated only moderately. In line with the definition of procrastination as a combination of delaying to work on a task and discomfort with the delay, affective well-being was better predicted by self-reported than by behavioral procrastination. This suggests that self-reported procrastination better reflects the construct than a purely behavioral measure of procrastination. Consequences and implications for further assessment of procrastination are discussed.

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## 1. Delay or procrastination? – A comparison of self-report and behavioral measures of procrastination and their impact on affective well-being

Unfortunately, most of us know the phenomenon of procrastination all too well, i.e., to delay working on a goal one has intended to pursue and feeling guilty about it. Although most authors agree on these two key elements of procrastination – delay and discomfort – there is no agreement in the literature on an exact definition (Corkin, Yu, & Lindt, 2011; Steel, 2010). Along with the diversity in the definition of procrastination comes the challenge to find an adequate way to measure the phenomenon. There are a number of well-documented and frequently used measurement instruments of procrastination, such as the Academic Procrastination State Inventory (APSI, Schouwenburg, 1995), the General Procrastination Scale (GPS, Lay, 1986), and Academic Procrastination Scale (APS, Aitken, 1982), as well as more recently developed scales combining previous scales, such as the scale “Procrastination” (Schwarzer, 2000) and the Pure Procrastination Scale (Steel, 2010). What most of these scales have in common is that they assess different aspects of habitual procrastination, such as delaying to work on a task, concentration deficits, lack of energy and persistence, and

the feeling of guilt or frustration about not having proceeded as planned.

### 1.1. How well do self-report procrastination scales reflect behavior?

Much of the extant literature on procrastination has adopted self-report instruments and methodologies to assess this phenomenon. However, how well scale-based self-report measures of procrastination reflect the actual behavior remains subject of an on-going debate (Steel, Brothen, & Wambach, 2001), and is currently understudied. However, there are some notable exceptions. For instance, the pioneers of procrastination research, Solomon and Rothblum (1984), intended to assess the prevalence of procrastination for very specific academic behavior using the Procrastination Assessment Scale for Students (PASS). They let students report procrastination for specific academic situations such as writing a term paper or keeping up with weekly reading assignments, and asked them to which degree procrastination is a problem for them. In addition to these measures, Solomon and Rothblum assessed as a behavioral index of procrastination how many self-paced quizzes students took in the last third of the semester. They found only relatively moderate positive correlations between the number of quizzes and self-reported procrastination, and conclude that affective and cognitive aspects have to be considered for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

We shortly review three studies comparing self-reported academic procrastination on a trait level with behavioral

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procrastination measured multiple times. In the studies by Moon and Illingworth (2005) and Steel et al. (2001), behavioral academic procrastination was operationalized as the difference between the date an introductory psychology test was available on the Internet and the day students actually took the test. Results showed moderate positive correlations between trait self-report procrastination and behavioral procrastination. Steel et al. (2001) observed a lack of convergence between observed and self-report measures due to the notion that in self-report measures of procrastination participants often retrospectively negatively evaluate their behavior. Moon and Illingworth (2005) concluded that trait-based assessments of procrastination might not adequately describe actual behavior.

DeWitte and Schouwenburg (2002) used a different behavioral measure of procrastination, namely how many hours students intended to study during the coming week and how many hours they actually had studied in the prior week. They assessed behavioral procrastination over the period of 10 weeks in a sample of  $N = 21$  university students, and correlated this measure with a trait measure of procrastination. They found behavioral procrastination to be unrelated to the trait measure of procrastination and explain their findings with their rather small sample size.

### 1.2. Goal 1: Comparison of self-report procrastination over time with actual behavior

Although these studies provide important foundations for future procrastination research, they are limited in a key way: They investigated the relationship between self-reported procrastination measured on a trait level and multiple measures of specific behavioral procrastination over time. To date, it has not been investigated how indices of both self-report and behavioral procrastination relate when both are measured multiple times. Therefore, the first goal of the present research is to expand the validation of self-report measures of procrastination by relating them to behavioral measures of procrastination in a study over time in a real life situation in the academic context. We employ a state-based self-report measure of procrastination (APSI, Schouwenburg, 1995) and a behavioral measure in a short-term longitudinal study with university students. The behavioral measure is based on DeWitte and Schouwenburg (2002) and consists of the difference between planned and actual study hours.

The approach of assessing both self-reported and behavioral measures of procrastination repeatedly over time offers two advantages. First, such data allow us to validate self-reported procrastination measured over time with a behavioral proxy of procrastination over time, hence we close a gap in the literature. Second, the repeated-measures design permits estimation of trajectories and the development of both measures over a short period of time. These models allow us to detect similarities and differences of the measures during a real-life study situation.

### 1.3. Goal 2: Validation of self-report procrastination via affective well-being

Procrastination research seems to agree on the notion that not all delay is procrastination but all procrastination is associated with delay (Pychyl, 2009). So, what differentiates procrastination from delay? Defining procrastination as tendency to delay initiation or completion of important tasks to the point of discomfort (Howell & Watson, 2007; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984) ties the phenomenon to the feeling of guilt, or generally lower levels of well-being (i.e., Pychyl, Lee, Thibodeau, & Blunt, 2000). Steel and Ferrari (2013), for example, state that procrastination is delaying something “despite expecting to be worse off for the delay” (p. 51). Krause and Freund (2013) pointed out that the feeling of guilt might

even be functional for bringing procrastinating persons back on track. Most of the self-report procrastination scales include items reflecting this emotional aspect of the construct (Klingsieck, 2013). For instance, Milgram, Batori, and Mowrer (1993) found that procrastination measured with the PASS correlated moderately high with emotional upset. More importantly in the current context, Steel et al. (2001) found that trait affect correlated with self-reported but not with behavioral procrastination. In other words, although a behavioral measure of procrastination seems to assess delay it might fail to reflect the emotional aspect that is essential in the definition of procrastination. In consequence, Corkin et al. (2011) propose the term “active delay” to differentiate a form of delay that lacks the irrationality and negative emotions from procrastination. Thus, we expect that affective well-being as an important part of the construct of procrastination can be predicted best by self-report measures of procrastination, whereas a behavioral measure does not provide information about the emotions accompanying the delay.

In sum, the purpose of this paper is to (1) broaden and replicate previous findings on the relation between self-report and behavioral measures of procrastination over time with multiple measurement occasions by using a state measure of procrastination (instead of a one-time trait assessment as was done in previous research) and (2) investigate if state self-report measures of procrastination predict affective well-being better than a state measure of behavioral procrastination.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of  $N = 162$  undergraduate university students (75% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.43$  years.) who were recruited as a convenience sample in two lecture classes (Introduction to Law) at the University of Zurich.

### 2.2. Procedure

Before registering for participation, students were informed of the purpose and scope of the study and provided informed consent. As an incentive for their participation, participants entered a raffle for Amazon book vouchers with a total value of CHF 5000 (equivalent to 5400 US\$).

Data was collected in a nine-week longitudinal online study during student’s studying phase for an exam in “Introduction to Law.” The study consisted of 16 measurement points. The questionnaires were administered via a tool for online surveys ([www.socsisurvey.com](http://www.socsisurvey.com)). As a reminder, participants received emails containing a link to each questionnaire. In the first questionnaire students also filled out a measure of trait procrastination and reported their age. In the following eight weeks, participants filled out web-based questionnaires twice a week and each time rated their academic procrastination, their planned and actual studying time, their affective well-being, and other measures not relevant to the current study. After the exam, we assessed whether students had passed the exam and how satisfied they were with the way they had studied for the exam.

### 2.3. Measures

For the present set of analyses, we used the following measurement instruments. If not noted otherwise, participants rated all items on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much*. Means, SDs, and internal consistencies of the measures are pro-

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