Understanding procrastination: A motivational approach

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A B S T R A C T

Procrastination is often seen as a self-regulatory failure. We want to offer a perspective that shifts the focus from volitional to motivational aspects of procrastination. In an attempt to demystify the phenomenon, we combine two studies exploring the motivational foundations of procrastination with a study aiming to uncover its implicit normative connotations. Study 1 investigated the link between value orientations and procrastination at a general level, showing that people high in procrastination entertain low achievement and high well-being value orientations. Study 2 investigated the link between self-determination and procrastination within and across daily activities. Low self-determination related to low levels of activity completion and to procrastination in general. Finally, Study 3 investigated the link between value as well as political orientations and perceptions of procrastination. Individuals who favored modern, conservative values were more likely to attribute academic procrastination as personal failure, whereas individuals who endorsed post-modern, liberal values were more likely to consider situational causes of academic procrastination. Against this background, we argue for a less normative view on procrastination and recommend motivational (e.g., goal selection) rather than volitional (e.g., goal implementation) interventions to prevent procrastination.

1. Introduction

Procrastination is an enigmatic phenomenon. Why do individuals act against their good intentions (i.e., not doing what they intended to do)? In the present paper we argue that much of the mysterious character of procrastination vanishes when motivational rather than volitional construals such as self-regulatory failure are considered. We also argue that specific normative beliefs about the desirability of certain events and activities shape our understanding of procrastination. Hence, our analysis comprises two different levels. At the individualistic level, we explore the motivational foundations of procrastination. We simply ask: Do people really *want* what they intended to do? We substantiate our analyses by answering this question from two different research traditions and different methodological approaches: general value orientations and activity-specific self-determination. Specifically, we propose that procrastination as a trait and task delay as the underlying behavior can be better understood when individual differences in general values as well as momentary differences in the quality of motivation are considered. In complement to this individualistic approach, we take a more sociological perspective by uncovering the implicit normative connotations that may underlie the understanding of procrastination as self-regulatory failure. We propose that the attribution of procrastination depends on general value and political orientations and the extent to which these normative positions

are violated. To test these assumptions, we conducted three studies: A cross-sectional, a diary, and a vignette study.

1.1. Procrastination as self-regulatory failure

Over the last several decades, many definitions of procrastination have been proposed. Despite conceptual inconsistencies, most researchers agree that procrastination is a) fairly prevalent (especially among students, e.g., Schouwenburg, 2004; van Eerde, 2003) and b) something that needs to be overcome in order to live a more successful and happier life (e.g., Steel, 2007). Klingsieck (2013) recently proposed an integrated definition of procrastination as "the voluntary delay of an intended and necessary and/or [personally] important activity, despite expecting potential negative consequences that outweigh the positive consequences of the delay." (p. 26).

The *intention-action gap* is often seen as the core aspect of procrastination (Lay, 1986; Steel, 2007). From this perspective, something enigmatic and irrational occurs in the time between setting an intention and acting this intention out. "Procrastinators" seem to lack self-regulatory skills such as self-control (Rebetez, Rochat, Barsics, & van der Linden, 2016; Schouwenburg & Groenewoud, 2001), emotion regulation (Eckert, Ebert, Lehr, Sieland, & Berking, 2016, motivation regulation (Grunschel, Schwinger, Steinmayr, & Fries, 2016), time management (Wolters, Won, & Hussain, 2017), and learning strategies

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(Howell & Watson, 2007; Wolters, 2003) that allow them to successfully act out their intention.

From this perspective of procrastination as self-regulatory failure, interventions focus on how people can be supported in maintaining their initial intentions (e.g., Ferrari, 2001). The nature of these intentions is not questioned. It is here where our approach comes in. In line with the notion that "not all goals are personal goals" (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998), we propose a straightforward motivational explanation of procrastination. From our perspective, procrastination itself (i.e., the delay) is not "irrational" at all, but occurs when individuals pursue goals that are not in line with their personal values and basic needs. This may happen, because people now and then (have to) comply with externally imposed expectations and goals. However, from an "outsider" perspective, that is, especially for people who possess a different or even antithetic value structure, not pursuing these goals with eager tenacity may appear "irrational". In the following sections, we first argue for the critical role of personal values and basic needs in steady goal pursuit. We then describe the role of personal values and attitudes in making attributions about others' procrastination and dilatory behavior.

1.2. A motivational approach to procrastination

In line with many other researchers, we understand procrastination as reflecting difficulties in goal pursuit. However, in contrast to other approaches, we do not think that the problem is solved by focusing on the volitional, implementation phase of action only (cf. Gollwitzer, 1990). Rather, we think it is essential to consider the motivational basis of such impaired goal pursuits in terms of their congruence with personal values and basic needs. A motivational perspective on procrastination is not entirely new (cf. Klingsieck, 2013). However, the present contribution is unique in that we tie together complementing theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and analytical levels. Furthermore, we explicitly address crucial motivational concepts relevant to procrastination in their inherent energetic implications, and not as sub-processes of self-regulation (e.g., Wolters, 2003).

1.2.1. Personal values as standards to guide and substantiate action

In social and cross-cultural psychology, values such as security and tolerance are defined as shared beliefs about desired goals (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Smith & Schwartz, 1997). Everyone holds a certain set of values, but not everyone finds every value equally important. Schwartz (2006) conceptualized values as "warm" beliefs, inextricably tied to emotions. They guide the evaluation of actions, events, and people in that they serve as a standard for desirability. Each action that one takes can be judged according to its match or mismatch to one's value structure. If an action leading to a specific goal is in dissonance with an individual's value system, the individual likely experiences intrapersonal conflict and goal pursuit comes unstuck, because the action lacks motivational basis. Although there are many values (e.g., Ford, 1992), Schwartz, 1992 proposed a universal structure of 10 basic human values, organized along two orthogonal dimensions. On one dimension, openness to change versus conservation, values such as stimulation and self-direction oppose values such as security and conformity. On the second dimension, self-transcendence versus self-enhancement, values such as benevolence oppose values such as achievement and power.

Which values might be relevant to procrastination? To answer this question, recent research on students' study–leisure conflicts is insightful. Drawing on Inglehart's (1997) theory of value change in post-industrialized societies, Hofer et al. (2007) proposed that students' so-called modern achievement and post-modern well-being value orientations determine students' decisions and self-regulatory success in the context of conflicts between study and leisure. They found that students who endorsed high achievement values preferred study-related activities in such conflict situations. Moreover, achievement-oriented

students reported lower impairments in self-regulation when imagining themselves to study in the presence of an alternative leisure temptation. For well-being oriented individuals, findings were the opposite. Intriguingly, Dietz, Hofer, and Fries (2007) found that achievement-oriented students reported lower academic procrastination scores than well-being oriented students. In terms of Schwartz's taxonomy, Hofer, Kuhnle, Kilian, Marta, and Fries (2011) showed that the modern achievement value orientation was more similar to the Schwartz conservation pole than to the self-enhancement pole, whereas the post-modern well-being value orientation aligned with the openness pole, mirroring stimulation, self-determination, and hedonism values.

The direct message from these findings is that students who highly endorse achievement-oriented values may procrastinate less than students who highly endorse well-being oriented values. A possible explanation for this finding is that achievement-oriented students routinely prefer study-related over leisure-related activities and experience less impairments during studying under a leisure temptation, presumably because personal values determine specific activity related valences (Fries, Schmid, & Hofer, 2007). The more indirect message is that we need to assume similar value structures for all individuals if, for example, academic procrastination is described as "irrational" or "unnecessary". In other words, procrastination at the cost of future-oriented achievement outcomes in favor of immediate leisure-related gratification would only be "irrational" if achievement outcomes are indeed perceived by the individual to be more valuable than the momentary pleasure of leisure-related activities. Put into a broader social context, general procrastination would only be "irrational" if conformity with social expectations such as punctuality, reliability, and steadiness is indeed perceived to be more important than personal diversification, flexibility, and self-determination. In a conceptual replication of Dietz et al. (2007), however, we do not think that such preferences are typical for individuals high on procrastination.

Our first hypothesis is that individuals with a higher well-being value orientation report higher general procrastination scores. Furthermore, we hypothesize a negative relationship between achievement value orientation and procrastination.

1.2.2. Self-determination and persistent behavior

There are two main reasons why people initiate and maintain actions. First, the action is pleasurable in itself. When this is the case, there is no need for further justification to act. Such forms of regulation are typically referred to as intrinsic motivation (cf. Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000). Second, the action is seen by the individual as a means to a valuable and/or pleasant end. Such instrumental forms of regulation are typically referred to as extrinsic motivation.

In Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the nature of intrinsic motivation and the relation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is explained. SDT proposes three "innate psychological nutriments that are that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 229). These basic human needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT also specifies the conditions under which goal-pursuits are functionally effective in terms of high persistence. The key to such a form of action regulation lies in the satisfaction of the three basic needs. Whenever these psychological needs are thwarted, negative consequences in terms of persistence and well-being are expected (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Thus, it is not the quantity of motivation (i.e., "how much" one is motivated) but rather the quality of motivation (i.e., "what" people strive for and "why") that is critical in SDT. Specifically, SDT proposes different forms of action regulation that differentiate goal-directed behavior along a continuum of self-determination. The highest level of self-determination is achieved in intrinsic regulation (Deci, 1975; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). However, in most situations, people engage in something in order to get something else. In SDT, these instrumental consequences are further differentiated into four qualities of extrinsic