



Cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors related to procrastination: A cluster analytic approach



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ABSTRACT

Procrastination is a widespread phenomenon that has been associated with a host of cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors but about which a clear and integrated picture is still lacking. The aim of this study was to use primary established psychological procrastination-related factors in the literature to examine whether reliable subgroups of procrastinators can be identified through cluster analysis. To this end, 180 French-speaking students were asked to complete a measure of procrastination and four questionnaires assessing impulsivity, cognitive emotion regulation, self-esteem, and global motivation. Four clusters were identified: two with the lowest scores of procrastination (“High regulated” and “Regulated/low motivated”), one with higher scores of procrastination (“Emotional”), and another with even higher scores (“Unregulated”). The findings provide insights into the dynamic relationships between key procrastination-related factors and the mechanisms linked to the self-regulation difficulties that characterize trait procrastination.

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1. Introduction

Procrastination, or to “voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay” (Steel, 2007, p. 66), is a widespread phenomenon that has been established as a stable trait (Gustavson, Miyake, Hewitt, & Friedman, 2014) and associated with a host of psychological factors (Steel, 2007). Despite numerous studies and evidence regarding key factors related to procrastination, however, there is still no clear and integrated understanding about it (Wilson & Nguyen, 2012). Indeed, although the trend has been towards considering procrastination as a complex array of cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors (Pychyl & Flett, 2012), they have mostly been examined independently of one another, leading to a fragmented representation of this phenomenon.

1.1. Psychological factors related to procrastination

Procrastination is classically conceptualized as a self-regulatory failure, representative of low conscientiousness and high

impulsiveness (Steel, 2007). More specifically with regard to impulsivity, Steel (2007) demonstrated that this construct is one of the strongest correlates of procrastination ($r = .41$, $K = 22$). In addition, Gustavson et al. (2014) showed a genetic overlap ($r_{\text{genetic}} = 1.0$) between the two constructs, and interpreted it from a cognitive (procrastination and impulsivity shared a common cognitive ability, namely, goal-management ability) and an evolutionary perspective (procrastination may be an evolutionary by-product of impulsivity). Nonetheless, an understanding of the relationship between procrastination and impulsivity requires taking into account that impulsivity is a multidimensional construct. Indeed, Whiteside and Lynam (2001) identified four distinct components of impulsivity in their Urgency-Premeditation-Perseverance-Sensation seeking [UPPS] model: urgency (tendency to experience strong reactions, frequently under conditions of negative affect); premeditation (tendency to take into account the consequences of an act before engaging in that act); perseverance (ability to remain focused on a boring/difficult task); and sensation seeking (tendency to enjoy and pursue new/exciting activities). Urgency, premeditation, and perseverance are related to cognitive/self-control mechanisms, whereas sensation seeking depends on motivational dispositions (Bechara & Van der Linden, 2005). More recent work also suggests the existence of positive urgency (tendency to act rashly when experiencing intense positive emotions) that, together with negative urgency, refers to a general

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disposition to mood-based rash action (Cyders & Smith, 2008). According to the UPPS model, procrastination has been linked to the self-control-related dimensions of impulsivity (urgency, lack of premeditation, lack of perseverance) (Dewitte & Schouwenburg, 2002). The lack of perseverance observed in procrastinators thus reflects difficulties in staying focused on an intended task that demands attentional control; lack of premeditation reflects difficulties in taking into account potential long-term negative consequences of delaying; and urgency reflects proneness to engage in activities other than those intended when faced with intense emotional states.

Supporting the role of urgency in procrastination, some recent studies have stressed the importance of considering emotion regulation as being central to procrastination. For example, according to Sirois and Pychyl (2013), procrastinators prioritize the management of immediate mood (e.g., voluntary delay of an intended task viewed as aversive to repair the negative mood surrounding the task) over long-term goal pursuit. Moreover, Stainton, Lay, and Flett (2000) demonstrated a strong association between a procrastination-specific form of rumination (automatic thoughts about one's tendencies to delay) and procrastination. They also demonstrated that this form of rumination mediated the link between procrastination and negative affect, and that it was strongly associated with a more general measure of negative automatic thoughts about the self (e.g., "What's wrong with me?"). These data underline the notion of poor cognitive emotion regulation strategies (cognitive and voluntary aspects of emotion regulation, that is, the thoughts and mental strategies intentionally used to regulate emotions) in procrastinators. These data also underline the importance of self-related factors; not surprisingly, self-esteem has been consistently related to procrastination (Steel, 2007). Procrastination is considered as a self-protective strategy that masks a fragile self-esteem; by avoiding task completion, one's perceived inability is never tested.

Global motivation (general motivational orientation) has also received much attention from many researchers (e.g., Brownlow & Reasinger, 2000; Lee, 2005; Sirin, 2011; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). Like impulsivity, it is a multidimensional construct that can be divided into three major types of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985): intrinsic (resulting from internal drives), extrinsic (resulting from external contingencies), and amotivation. In addition, intrinsic motivation can be differentiated into more specific motives: "to know" (behaving for pleasure when learning/exploring/trying to understand something new), "toward accomplishment" (behaving for pleasure when attempting to accomplish/create something), and "to experience stimulating sensation." Extrinsic motivation can also be differentiated into more specific motives: "identified" (behaviors performed by choice because they are judged as important), "introjected" (behaviors regulated by internal pressures, such as pride or guilt), and "external regulation" (behaviors regulated through external means, such as rewards and constraints). Findings on the relationships between these types of motivation and procrastination are unclear, however, with heterogeneous results showing links with intrinsic motivation (Brownlow & Reasinger, 2000; Lee, 2005) and/or extrinsic motivation (Brownlow & Reasinger, 2000; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), or with amotivation (Lee, 2005), or showing no links (Sirin, 2011).

1.2. Current study

The aim of the current study was to examine from primary established psychological procrastination-related factors in the literature, namely, self-control-related dimensions of impulsivity (urgency, lack of premeditation, lack perseverance), inappropriate cognitive emotion regulation strategies, self-esteem, and one or several global motivation components (intrinsic motivation to

know/accomplishment/stimulation, extrinsic motivation identified/introjected/external, amotivation), whether subgroups of procrastinators can be identified through cluster analysis.

Considering that procrastination results from a complex array of cognitive, emotional, and motivational factors, the use of cluster analysis seems well suited for examining it. Indeed, cluster analysis is a person-based approach that explores how different variables are combined into diverse profiles within individuals, in contrast to a variable-based approach that investigates each variable independently from the others (e.g., correlation analyses).

In accordance with the literature, we hypothesized that cluster analysis would allow identification of at least two distinct subgroups of procrastinators. A first subgroup would match the classic view of procrastination as a self-regulatory failure. This subgroup would mainly be characterized by low-level of self-regulation (i.e., high scores on the three self-control-related dimensions of impulsivity and inappropriate cognitive emotion regulation strategies). A second subgroup would match the more recent view in which emotion regulation is considered as central in procrastination. This subgroup would be characterized by high urgency (emotional self-control dimension of impulsivity), high inappropriate cognitive emotion regulation strategies, and low self-esteem. Moreover, the possibility of a third subgroup of procrastinators characterized by low global motivation on one or several of its components could not be excluded, but we postulated that it would be less clear considering the substantial heterogeneity of the findings in the literature. Finally, we postulated the existence of a last subgroup with low scores of procrastination that, in contrast to the first subgroup, would be characterized by a high level of self-regulation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred eighty students (153 females, 27 males) from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Geneva completed a measure of procrastination and four questionnaires assessing self-control-related dimensions of impulsivity (urgency, lack of premeditation, lack perseverance), inappropriate cognitive emotion regulation strategies, self-esteem, and global motivation components (intrinsic motivation to know/accomplishment/stimulation, extrinsic motivation identified/introjected/external, amotivation). The mean age of the sample was 21.85 years ($SD = 3.56$, range = 18–44).

2.2. Measures

All measures have been previously validated with francophone samples and demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties.

Procrastination was measured with the French adaptation of the Pure Procrastination Scale (PPS; Rebetz, Rochat, Gay, & Van der Linden, 2014; original version, Steel, 2010), an 11-item scale for which a higher score indicates a higher tendency to procrastinate.

Self-control-related dimensions of impulsivity were assessed with the short UPPS Impulsive Behaviour Scale (Billieux et al., 2012). This 20-item scale evaluates the five facets of impulsivity (four items per dimension): negative urgency, positive urgency, lack of premeditation, lack of perseverance, and sensation seeking. For this study, only urgency (as positive and negative urgency facets were highly correlated, $r = .50$, $p < .001$, they were regrouped into a single factor of urgency; see Billieux et al., 2012), lack of premeditation, and lack of perseverance were considered. Higher scores indicate greater impulsivity.

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