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The mystery of "should": Procrastination, delay, and reactance in academic settings

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the effect of trait reactance on procrastination and delay in students of two study programmes differing in the structuring of academic tasks and the role they play in course assessment. Both subsamples ($n = 97$ and 139) completed measures of trait reactance, chronic academic procrastination, self-reported task procrastination and actual task delay. The data were analyzed using path analysis and SEM. As hypothesized, psychological reactance positively predicted procrastination, especially the 'chronic delay' component underlying all three procrastination-related measures. However, some of the effect of reactance on this delay-dependent component of procrastination was apparently suppressed by what might have been a subjective (delay-independent) component of self-reported task procrastination. Furthermore, reactance was significantly related to delay only when good performance on the task was of relatively high importance. Apart from providing evidence for a possible link between reactance and procrastination, the results also demonstrate that it is important to distinguish between the experiential and objective (temporal) components of procrastination, as the two might be represented by completely different nomological networks.

1. Introduction

It is hardly possible to speak about procrastination when it is not yet clear what one should do. Still, procrastination is largely about choice – about determining the *implementation conditions* for the task one wishes to complete (Van Eerde, 2000). *When* we start working is not essentially dependent on *how important* the task is (O'Donoghue & Rabin, 2001) because it does not directly impact the outcome of the task. Over a long time span, there are many ways to organize one's actions so that both more and less important tasks get completed on time, and deciding between these tasks (considering importance, urgency, attractiveness, etc.) can be difficult and overwhelming.

The Theory of Psychological Reactance (Brehm, 1966) suggests that people generally tend to protect their important freedoms of choice: when one's free choice is threatened, the suddenly unavailable alternatives become more attractive, while the "imposed" alternative becomes *less* attractive. Consequently, people look for ways to get the eliminated alternatives back rather than doing what they "should" do. What is important, reactance does not occur when there is no initial freedom of choice, or when the individual alternatives differ widely in their motivational strength. Thus, reactance is essentially aroused in pre-decisional phases, especially when the future decision is perceived as significant (Linder & Crane, 1970).

The mechanism of reactance can be easily applied to implementation choices. In the time available, many different tasks – not only the central one – are to be completed. Although people might be especially anxious to set aside enough time to complete the most important task, their decisions on what to do *at a particular point in time* are not primarily guided by the overall value of the task, but by how much they perceive the current conditions as favorable for initiating action (Gollwitzer, 1993). If one knows it will take, for example, two days to get the job done, having a ten-day reserve creates a true freedom of implementation choice. However, the feeling of obligation that pressures the individual to start working in advance might threaten this freedom and arouse reactance, inspiring the procrastinator to engage in a different activity *and* choose a different time to start working. This might happen particularly when task prioritization is not straightforward. For example, people might pressure themselves to work on the most urgent task first, but if the deadline is still far away, this pressure threatens their freedom to choose by other relevant criteria, such as importance, attractiveness, or immediacy.

The amount of reactance aroused in a particular situation depends on both personality and situational factors, which

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together determine the degree of perceived threat and the importance of the freedom threatened (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The main goal of the present study is to explore the effect of trait reactance on academic procrastination. The construct of *trait reactance* is based on the idea that sensitivity to freedom threats might become generalized to various aspects of reality (Chadee, 2011). Thus, people high in trait reactance are likely to show higher *state reactance* across different freedom-restricting situations. In the context of implementation choice, this would mean they would generally start working *later* than less reactant people, i.e. they would be greater procrastinators. Moreover, the effect of trait reactance on delay would be *proportional* to the potential of a given task or situation to arouse state reactance.

Although it might be relatively difficult to assess this potential in real-life contexts, free implementation choice is likely to be highly important and, at the same time, highly threatened, especially when (1) there are multiple important tasks to be completed simultaneously, and (2) successful completion of these tasks depends on the amount of time and planning invested into each of them. In other words, if planning has little perceived impact on the final outcome (e.g., the assignment is relatively unimportant, little feedback is provided, etc.), delay will be caused by a lack of motivation to exercise self-control rather than reactance. On the other hand, when the task is demanding and the outcome is thoroughly analyzed and evaluated, the increased pressure to start working in advance, combined with the presence of competing tasks, will increase reactance, maintaining procrastination until one's freedom of choice is completely eliminated, i.e. right before a deadline.

There is, however, one essential paradox to this reasoning: because the principal source of threat to the implementation choice is the subjective feeling that the work *should be started* in advance, the same feelings of obligation which are aimed at *reducing delay* might actually *increase delay* through arousing reactance. In addition, these feelings may stand at the core of *self-reported procrastination*: people tend to perceive themselves as procrastinating especially when their commitment to the task is high.

It is therefore essential to distinguish between two components of self-reported procrastination: (a) a *delay component*, which is the actual difference between the times when procrastinators and non-procrastinators start working, and (b) a *subjective component*, i.e. the degree to which the subject feels he/she procrastinates. The subjective component is only partly determined by the delay component. For example, overcommitted people, people with unrealistically high personal standards, or those who chronically focus on those goals or details which were not taken care of in the time available, could present themselves as procrastinators in self-report measures although their actual working habits might resemble those of non-procrastinators. In addition, a subjective sense of procrastination might be triggered by task- and situation-specific factors. For example, when a task is especially important, one might start to worry much more about not completing it in time than one usually does. Similarly, when the task turns out to be unexpectedly time-consuming, self-critical individuals might start to perceive their past time-management decisions as procrastination due to hindsight bias.

The interaction between reactance and the two components of procrastination is outlined in Fig. 1. The simplified diagram suggests that the causal relationship between aroused reactance and subjective experience of procrastination is bidirectional: on the one hand, reactance amplifies situational experience of procrastination through increasing delay. On the other hand, subjective experience of procrastination, associated with feelings of guilt and anxiety, increases pressure to start working immediately, producing more reactance. Yet, delay-unrelated experience of procrastination does not essentially arouse state reactance, especially

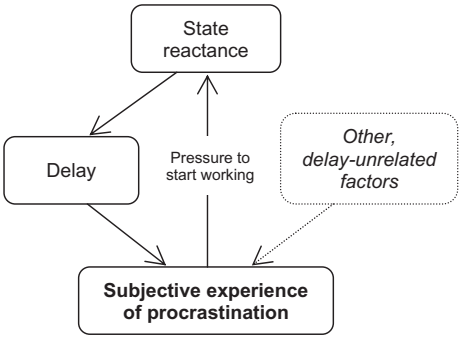

Fig. 1. Hypothetical causal relationships between state reactance and procrastination components.

when the subjects do not primarily perceive their implementation choices as free. In general, the model implies that only delay-related components of self-reported procrastination are associated with reactance.

To explore these interrelations empirically, I used three different variables to address the issue of procrastination in the present study. Two of these variables are essentially subjective: *chronic academic procrastination*,[1] a perceived chronic tendency to unreasonably delay academic tasks beyond the "optimal" point, and *self-reported task procrastination* (STP), a subjective sense of procrastination restricted to a specific task in a specific context. The third variable, *delay*, is represented by objective temporal information on how long before the deadline (or after task assignment) one starts working. Although these three variables are expected to be substantially intercorrelated, they represent different aspects of procrastination. Most importantly, variance in STP unexplained by chronic procrastination and delay should reflect purely subjective (delay-unrelated) situation-specific experience.

I hypothesize that trait reactance is a positive predictor of all three procrastination-related variables. However, I expect the effect on the self-reported task-procrastination to be completely explained by chronic academic procrastination and delay. In addition, reactance should be a stronger predictor of delay in the context where effective planning is especially necessary for successful course completion.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted students studying in two different programmes at a Czech university: English Language and Literature ($n = 97$; 84 female; Mean age = 22.3, $sd = 2.01$) and Psychology ($n = 139$; 95 female; Mean age = 24.5, $sd = 4.22$). The predominantly female representation reflected actual gender distributions in both study programmes. There was a significant age difference between the two groups ($t = 4.81$, $p < .001$), which, however, only had a negligible impact on the observed effects.

The two study programmes differed widely in standard course requirements and distribution of workload throughout the semester. Final grades in the English Language programme were derived from continuous assessment (response papers, quizzes, etc.) combined with grades for final tests and/or essays, which were the default option for course completion. The essays were thoroughly reviewed by the teachers, who provided relatively detailed feed-

[1] Since academic procrastination appears to be much more context-dependent than "general" procrastination (e.g., Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), the attribute "chronic" is preferred to "trait" in the present study.