



## Procrastination, consideration of future consequences, and episodic future thinking



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 12 March 2015

Revised 29 March 2016

Accepted 10 April 2016

#### Keywords:

Procrastination

Time perspective

Consideration of future consequences

Prospexion

Episodic future thinking

### ABSTRACT

Despite the intrinsic temporal nature of procrastination, little research has examined the link between this form of self-regulatory failure and the consideration of future consequences, and no study has addressed the link between procrastination and episodic future thinking. The aim of the present study was to explore these relationships. Participants were asked to project themselves into possible future events and to rate the amount of sensory-perceptual details and autoegetic consciousness associated with their representations. They were also asked to complete questionnaires that assessed procrastination, the consideration of future consequences, and negative affect. Results showed that both the consideration of future consequences and episodic future thinking were associated with procrastination, and in particular with procrastination-related decision making abilities and procrastination-related motivational dispositions, respectively.

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## 1. Introduction

Procrastination – voluntarily delaying an intended and necessary and/or [personally] important activity, despite expecting potential negative consequences that outweigh the positive consequences of the delay (Klingsieck, 2013) – is a widespread phenomenon that has been established as a stable trait and conceptualized as a self-regulatory failure (for a review, see Klingsieck, 2013; Rozental & Carlbring, 2014; Schouwenburg, Lay, Pychyl, & Ferrari, 2004; Steel, 2007). More specifically, recent theory suggests that procrastination is a form of temporal self-regulation failure, representative of high impulsiveness (Gustavson, Miyake, Hewitt, & Friedman, 2014) and reflecting a primacy of present self over the needs of the future self (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). This failure to regulate the self over time may lead procrastinators to experience more negative emotions, such as shame and guilt (Fee & Tangney, 2000; Flett, Stainton, Hewitt, Sherry, & Lay, 2012), and generally to experience less well-being (Sirois & Tosti, 2012).

Given its intrinsic temporal nature, procrastination has been associated with individual differences in time perspective (dispositional style towards being past-, future-, or present-oriented, which reflects processes involving how the flow of experiences are assigned to temporal frames that help to give order, coherence and meaning to these events;

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Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). In particular, procrastination has been consistently related to a low level of future time perspective (for a review, see Díaz-Morales & Ferrari, 2015; Sirois, 2014). Procrastinators are thus less likely to use a future time orientation to guide their decisions and actions (Díaz-Morales, Ferrari, & Cohen, 2008; Ferrari & Díaz-Morales, 2007; Gupta, Hershey, & Gaur, 2012; Jackson, Fritch, Nagasaka, & Pope, 2003). Moreover, Sirois (2004) looked at the link between procrastination and a specific form of future time orientation, namely, the consideration of future consequences (the extent to which people consider future versus immediate consequences of potential behaviors; Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994). Procrastinators were less likely to consider the potential future outcomes of their current behavior. These data suggest that procrastination involves a decisional conflict between the immediate and delayed consequences of one's behavior.

However, envisioning what might happen in the future requires not only to orient oneself towards a future time period, but also to construct a detailed representation of events that could occur. This distinction is important because recent evidence suggests that temporal orientation and event construction are dissociable processes. For example, Kwan et al. (2012) demonstrated that a person with episodic amnesia, who was unable to imagine possible future events, still systematically discounted the value of future rewards (which requires future orientation but not event construction). Nevertheless, the ability to imagine possible future events may interact with future-oriented decision making (and/or temporal orientation) to support the representation of what might happen in the future (Szpunar, Spreng, & Schacter, 2014). This ability to imagine possible future events – often termed “episodic future thinking” – implies the association and flexible recombination of elements stored in episodic memory, such as details about particular locations, persons, and objects (Schacter & Addis, 2007; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). These details are represented as simulations in modality-specific systems (Barsalou, 2008) and give rise to mental images subjectively perceived as more or less vivid (D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2006). In addition to these sensory-perceptual qualities, episodic future thoughts are accompanied by “cognitive feelings” (Conway, 2009), including autoegetic consciousness (the subjective sense of being brought forward in time to pre-experience an event; Tulving, 2002; Wheeler, Stuss, & Tulving, 1997). Such cognitive feelings are of central importance, as they influence one's beliefs about what might happen in the future, which in turn influence one's decisions and actions (Libby, Shaeffer, Eibach, & Slemmer, 2007). Overall, the ability to imagine plausible future events is deemed to have a strong adaptive value in daily life, in particular, by supporting goal-directed behaviors. For example, mental simulation of future events facilitates the link between goals and actions by enhancing the subjective likelihood and/or value of a goal (which increases motivation) and by detailing the steps necessary to attain a goal (Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982; Karniol & Ross, 1996; Raffard, Eposito, Boulenger, & Van der Linden, 2013; Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998; Taylor & Schneider, 1989).

Episodic future thinking is thus critical for anticipating future needs and states that allow for better planning and understanding of the consequences of one's behaviors. In this respect, difficulties in imagining the future may be linked to procrastination – conceptualized as a self-regulatory failure (see Steel, 2007) – but no study has yet, to our knowledge, examined this link. Furthermore, while the link between procrastination and general orientation towards the future has been examined several times (see Díaz-Morales & Ferrari, 2015; Sirois, 2014), the link with a more specific form of future time orientation (i.e., the consideration of future consequences) has received little attention. The way in which the consideration of future consequences and episodic future thinking contribute to procrastination could be related to two factors that have been recently shown to underlie the French version of the Pure Procrastination Scale (Rebetz, Rochat, Gay, & Van der Linden, 2014): “Voluntary delay,” which refers to the notion of irrationally and/or voluntarily putting off things or decisions, and “Observed delay,” which relates to noticing that one is running out of time, not getting things done on time, or not being very good at meeting deadlines. These two factors depended on a higher-order construct of procrastination and were differentially associated with measures of impulsivity. Indeed, Voluntary delay was related to lack of premeditation (the tendency to not take into account the consequences of an act before engaging in that act; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001), suggesting a preference to act on the spur of the moment, disregarding the long-term consequences of delaying. On the other hand, Observed delay was related to sensation seeking (the tendency to enjoy and pursue new/exciting activities; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001) and therefore might be a manifestation of stimulation seeking (e.g., getting the “rush” from completing the task close to the deadline; Ferrari, 1992).

In this context, the objective of the present study was to explore the relationships between procrastination (both Voluntary and Observed delay), the consideration of future consequences, and episodic future thinking. Participants were thus asked to project themselves into possible future events and to rate the amount of sensory-perceptual details and the level of autoegetic consciousness associated with their representations. They further completed questionnaires assessing procrastination, the consideration of future consequences, and negative affect (included as a control variable given its close connection with procrastination; see Fee & Tangney, 2000; Flett et al., 2012; Sirois & Pychyl, 2013).

The following predictions were tested. First, we predicted that procrastination (and more specifically Voluntary delay, i.e., the procrastination factor associated with lack of premeditation) would relate to a low level of consideration of future consequences. Second, regarding the relationships between procrastination and episodic future thinking, we predicted that procrastination (both Voluntary delay and Observed delay) would relate to lower episodic future thinking abilities (as measured by the amount of sensory-perceptual qualities and the level of autoegetic consciousness when imagining future events). Indeed, mental simulation of future events facilitates the link between goals and actions (see Karniol & Ross, 1996; Raffard et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 1998); by contrast, poor representations of future events may contribute to the intention-action gap that characterizes procrastination.

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